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Elizabeth Leake. *The Reinvention of Ignazio Silone.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003. viii + 200 pp. $56.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8020-8767-6.

Stanislao G. Pugliese. *Bitter Spring: A Life of Ignazio Silone.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009. 448 pp. $27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-11348-3.

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Ignazio Silone: The Assault on a Cultural Icon

With *Fontamara* (1933) and *Bread and Wine* (1936), Ignazio Silone became one of the leading anti-Fascist writers of the decade. Both novels dealt in part with the negative impact of Fascism on the peasant world of his beloved native Abruzzo. He voiced other concerns as well, but the reading public of that day focused on his anti-Fascist themes. Published originally in German translation, the two books would appear in Italian much later, and then to a much less enthusiastic response than elsewhere in the West. The post-World War II Italian literary establishment, deeply influenced by the Communist cultural hegemony, found him objectionable for his anti-Communism. Silone had been one of the founders in 1921 of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which looked to the Bolsheviks in Russia for instruction and guidance. Then, as he explained in a famous memoir essay that appeared in Richard Crossmanâs *God That Failed* (1949), the culmination of Soviet Communism in Stalinism disillusioned him. In 1931, the PCI expelled him, and from that point on, he had to face opposition from both the Fascists and the Communists.

Silone found a new home in the Socialist Party (PSI) and continued to write voluminously. Although none of his later novels or plays found favor equal to the success of *Fontamara* and *Bread and Wine*, he enjoyed a celebrity achieved by very few Italian writers of his generation. Always a man of controversy, he attacked Fascism and Communism as irredeemably totalitarian ideologies. After the Second World War, he thought it only a matter of time before Communism would follow Fascism into the dustbin of history. He equated democracy with socialism, arguing that economic inequalities would always be politically decisive wherever they existed. Communism, however, aggravated the deplorable socioeconomic conditions under capitalism by depriving people of all free-

dom.

Although Silone sided with the United States in the Cold War, he nevertheless characterized American consumer society as a soul-destroying contradiction of the Christian Socialism that he espoused. The United States made use of his anti-Communism, but he proved to be an unpredictable ally. George Orwell, who admired Silone and shared many of his ideological viewpoints, thought of him as an independent-minded man naturally inclined to go against the grain of every orthodoxy. The British writerâs appreciative characterization of Silone captured the main outlines of the preponderantly positive image that he enjoyed at the time of his death in 1978.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, however, some disquieting newspaper reports about Silone began to appear. The Italian archives were said to contain incriminating documents concerning his alleged longstanding collaboration with the Fascist police during the 1920s. Dario Biocca, the researcher who discovered these documents, published an initial report of his findings in the May-June 1998 issue of *Nuova Storia Contemporanea*, âIgnazio Silone e la Polizia Politica: Storia di un Informatore.â Biocca claimed that the evidence in the archives showed that Silone had led a double life. While serving the PCI in key leadership positions, he had furnished damaging information about the party to a Fascist policeman, Guido Bellone. Bioccaâs full indictment of Silone appeared in a book that he coauthored with Mauro Canali, *LâInformatore: Silone, i Comunisti e la Polizia* (2000) and in his *Silone: La Doppia Vita di un Italiano* (2005). Around the world, these newspaper reports and scholarly publications produced shock, dismay, and anger among Silone supporters, while his adversaries greeted the revelations delightedly and with a sense that history at long last had brought his reputation to the bar of justice. Elizabeth Leake and Stanislao G. Pugliese both use the Biocca revelations as the starting point for their books.

Leake, a literature specialist, reveals in the acknowledgments and first chapter–âSilone and the Fascistsâ–that she holds Bioccaâs work in high regard. She does not question the authenticity of Bioccaâs documents or raise probing questions about his interpretation of them. Indeed, in describing her research experience in Romeâs Archivio Centrale dello Stato, she comments with some exhilaration about âworking at that time in tandem with the historian Dario Bioccaâ (p. 9). Elsewhere, she expresses gratitude for the efficacy of his insights, vouchsafed to her during the course of âmany discussionsâ (p. vii). In her mind, Silone stands guilty as charged by Biocca of betraying his party by working as a paid informer for the Fascist regime. For a comparable scandal in the annals of American literature, one would have to imagine a scenario in which incontrovertible proof had been found to demonstrate Mark Twainâs secret collusion with the Republican administrations he publicly excoriated in the imperialist aftermath of the Spanish-American War even while giving them damaging information about the Anti-Imperialist League in which he held high office. What a fall would be there. And so it has been for Silone, once the shining anti-Fascist hero now transformed into a *venduto*, a term that carries an especially heavy freight of condemnation in a land described by Niccolo Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini as the home of the most exquisitely ruthless betrayals in history.

Taking a psychoanalytical approach, Leake examines three key Silone texts. She begins with a collection of his early short stories, *Viaggio a Parigi* (published in 1934, though written in 1929), which should be seen as the first installment of âthe quiet confession Silone rehearsed throughout his literary careerâ (p. 15). In short, the documents discovered by Biocca confirm Siloneâs artfully hedged autobiographical portrayals of his own acts of spying, dissimulation, and betrayal. Beniamino Losurdo, the central figure of the collectionâs title story, stands out in the Silone canon as an anomaly. Leake comments on the stylistic singularities of Siloneâs maiden literary effort: its overt eroticism, irreverence toward holy images, mockery of peasants, and the inclusion of poetry in the narrative. Yet the theme of deception that would always hold Silone the writer in obsessive thrall appears here. Silone would disavow this book as a substandard literary performance, but Leake effectively makes her case in this chapter âthat Siloneâs early writings perform a therapeutic function for the authorâ (p. 86).

Bernardo Viola in *Fontamara* represents the next stage in âthe fictionalization of Siloneâs self-documented experienceâ (p. 107). Leake interprets the book in the light of âa psychoanalytical reading that incorporates a Gramscian readingâ (p. 114). It is not entirely clear what this combination of theoretical approaches means in practical terms. Here, *The Reinvention of Ignazio Silone* calls to mind the highly imaginative but ultimately futile attempt by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) to unite Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Marcuse addressed Freudâs obliterating dismissal of Marxism for its infantile ideas about human psychology by agreeing with him. Marxism, to be plausible, had to be turned into a theoretical amalgam that Marx never would have rec-

ognized or acknowledged as his own. Similarly, Leake relies primarily on proponents of psychoanalysis for her theoretical guides, most notably Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Å½iÅ¾ek. Antonio Gramsciâs ideas receive attention from her primarily for the ways they are diminished in favor of the theoretical supplements provided by psychoanalysis.

The novelistâs reinvention of himself achieved definitive expression in *Bread and Wine*, with the character of Pietro Spina âthe prism through which we view Siloneâ (p. 122). By this Leake means that in the public view Spinaâs heroic anti-Fascist and humanitarian Marxist story replaced the embarrassingly messy one that Silone had lived, with all of its moral failures and political ambiguities. She sees in the character of the informer Luigi Murica âa sanitized version of Siloneâs decision to spy for the Fascistsâ (p. 135). The central meaning of *Bread and Wine* unfolds against the background of Siloneâs anguished life and times. Siloneâs reinvention now complete, all of his subsequent protagonists followed in Spinaâs footsteps, with each new work further substantiating the authorâs image as a lonely existential hero in dubious battle for the common man against egotistical exploiters, corrupt institutions, and perverted ideological systems.

Having provided a reading of Silone âthat takes place from within the nexus of his personal and political life, the historical period in which he wrote, and ideological debates in the air at the time,â Leake has, in quite traditional terms, made a valuable contribution to our understanding of his work. Her statements about theory in the final chapter, however, do not inspire confidence and fall very far short of the bookâs actual achievements as a work of research and analysis. After following her densely packed argument regarding the abundant connections between literary texts and biographical-historical contexts, it comes as a severe anticlimax to read that âprofessional and non-professional readers alike would be well-served, I would argue, to reintroduce into our interpretive toolkit the notion of curiosity, of embarking on a reading in order to learn somethingâ (p. 157). The book is much richer than she makes it seem with her closing call for us as readers to be open âto the possibility of learning new things, or of giving voice to impressions outside the boundaries of current wisdomâ (p. 158). Literary criticism in this book appears to have come full circle, back to some basic postulates of a Socratic order about why we should engage in a life of the mind at all.

Pugliese finds inspiration in Leakeâs interpretation of Siloneâs early novels and cites her approvingly. The main point of his biography, however, concerns the aggressively anti-Biocca stance that he takes. He aspires to be evenhanded, writing, âcertainly this biography will please neither Siloneâs many admirers nor his myriad criticsâ (p. xix). He has not written a hagiographical book, but his enormous sympathy for Silone emanates from every page.

Puglieseâs book is worth reading, if only for the systematic analysis that he provides, in the final chapter, of Bioccaâs published claims and their bitterly contentious aftermath. The other chapters contain valuable information as well, although for some of the turning points in Siloneâs life he offers only superficial explanations. He shows a sensitive awareness of the ways in which Christianity survived in Siloneâs mature thinking, but we do not get from him a satisfactory explanation for why he abandoned Catholicism at a time when the influence of the priest, Don Luigi Orione, continued to be a powerful force in his life. Similarly, Siloneâs subsequent embrace of Marxism does not materialize in this book as a consequence of a serious conversion experience. He makes little effort to trace the young Siloneâs intellectual and political odyssey. We see him one day as a Catholic schoolboy and the next as a Communist revolutionary, without any in-depth analysis of how such a leap between faiths could have been made. Once in the extreme left-wing fold, Silone moved from Amadeo Bordigaâs faction to that of Gramsci, but we never learn why. The analysis does acquire greater depth, however, for the later stages of Siloneâs life.

A historian rather than a literary critic, Pugliese does not navigate beyond Leakeâs interpretation of the early foundational novels, but he makes some highly important contributions of his own to our understanding of the writerâs personal life. His interviews of Siloneâs Irish wife, Darina Laracy, constitute one of the bookâs principal areas of strength. From her, he received some vivid testimony about the punishing effects on their marriage of Siloneâs depression, melancholy, cruelty, and infidelities. She told Pugliese that her husband âhad no talent at all for human relationshipsâ (p. 174). Incapable of finding happiness in life, he took every particle of humanity that he had and crammed it into his writing. When Pugliese asked her about the spying scandal, she could tell him nothing. On that subject, as on most others, he remained an indecipherable personality to her. Such crippling drawbacks in their marriage did not prevent her from assiduously promoting his literary legacy until the

day she died in 2003. His death, Pugliese observes, âshe somehow sensed as a belated gift of liberationâ (p. 177).

Bitter Spring deserves praise as well for the thorough job that Pugliese does in describing Siloneâs post-World War II intellectual and political life. He provides a lively account of Siloneâs career as a writer, his work as an editor for various Socialist publications, and his ongoing battles to keep the party free of any involvement with the still-Stalinized PCI. Haziness does overtake the analysis when Pugliese tries to make implausible distinctions between Siloneâs relentless attacks on the PCI and his allegedly tender feelings toward Communism. He provides such a wealth of examples regarding Siloneâs ever-deepening aversion toward Communism that the reader experiences bewilderment tinged with exasperation when this sibylline sentence appears: âThe task for modern Socialists, according to Silone, is not to deny Marx, but to emancipate themselves from his thoughtâ (p. 209).

Some outright errors of fact and usage detract from the book. The Italian Republic came into existence in 1946, not 1956 (p. 194). Pugliese has *Bread and Wine* beating out *Grapes of Wrath* as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection in 1937, two years before the publication of John Steinbeckâs novel (pp. 214-215). The Communist Party leader, Palmiro Togliatti, died in 1964, not 1963 (p. 231). Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the pride of BesanÃ§on, France, becomes a Russian anarchist on page 240. Pugliese also did not receive the critical back-up that he needed and deserved for this book: A sentence with a missing word or phrase is found on page 288. Pugliese omits the plural and the italics for the *Pescinesi*, the people of Siloneâs birthplace (p. 291). On page 392 a bibliographical misattribution occurs.

Bitter Spring, however, rises above its errors and blemishes, most impressively in chapter 8, where Pugliese comments in a sustained way on the controversies arising from Bioccaâs findings. He writes as a fair-minded defender of Silone. His admiration for the novelist does not prevent him from following where the evidence leads. That Silone had a longstanding relationship with Bellone he accepts, asserting that at least some of Bioccaâs documents are authentic and say what they appear to say. The fundamental question for Pugliese has to do with how that relationship and the documentary evidence for it should be interpreted. In answering that question, he offers intelligent and balanced observations about the major spokesmen from the prosecution and the defense in the Silone case.

After magisterially considering the many warring interpretations of Siloneâs involvement with the Fascists, Pugliese concludes that the spying almost certainly took place. No one has been able to offer a completely convincing explanation for why he did it. Nevertheless, even the ardently pro-Silone Pugliese does not challenge the incriminating facts of the case. Less than ever before can we think of him as a man of unstained moral rectitude, but such a thought always belonged to the antihistorical realm of hagiography. For the truth in the Silone case, or as close to the truth as we can get, Pugliese points us in the direction of âthe no-manâs land between hagiography and the archiveâ (p. 330). I take this sensible recommendation to mean that we should read Siloneâs books, which âremain what they always were: powerful testaments to a struggle for justice and libertyâ (p. 341). From his lowest moments in the cesspool came books that will be read as long as people have an interest in studying the ideological illusions of the twentieth century.

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