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Plinio Martini, *Il fondo del sacco*

Series «La salamandra»
Size 13 x 21, pp. 176
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The book

“Il fondo del sacco”, Martini’s first and most successful novel, was published in 1970 and has never since been out of print (editor Casagrande, Bellinzona). Probably the best-known work by a Ticino writer, it has been successfully translated into German (Limmat Verlag, Zurich) and French, Switzerland’s other two main languages. Interest in Martini is still very much alive, as attested by a number of recent Swiss radio programmes to mark various anniversaries.

At first sight, this might seem to be a very straightforward story, describing the way of life and grinding poverty of the Val Bavona, one of the harshest Alpine valleys, in the 1930s; the narrator (Gori’s) departure for California, leaving behind the girl he loves; her death from pneumonia some months later; Gori’s life in America and eventual return home post-WWII to find everything changed, the old way of life and sense of community slipping away, all of it bound up in his mind with his lost love.

However, the work also has further interest and complexity.

Firstly, Martini, who was a teacher in local schools for most of his life and very much committed to improving the lot of his people, was consciously reacting against earlier romanticised representations of Heidi-style life in the Alpine valleys. The privations, accidents etc. are vividly described.

Secondly, the Catholic church had an ideological stranglehold on life in the villages, and Gori’s love/hate relationship with the village priest (based on a real character) reflects Martini’s own struggle to hold onto faith in God despite what he experienced of this suffocating dominance. The Catholic culture, in both its good and bad aspects, is here explored in depth. Martini is one of the few Italian writers to have done this, fairly showing both its sustaining and its life-denying effects.

Thirdly, it shows Ticino as a region exploited (in particular for its water resources) by the government of wealthy Switzerland north of the Alps, with the connivance/dull acquiescence of those in power locally.



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Fourthly, this is no linear account. The time perspective shifts chapter by chapter and within each chapter, from the perspective of the lad growing up in the valley to that of the emigrant in America, to that of the older man who has returned, well-off, to his native valley but feels like a ghost, at home nowhere except in the irretrievable past.

The story is shot through with regret and sadness, as well as love and appreciation for his people and their values, as Gori struggles to find some sort of quietus.

The result, I would argue, is a compelling story which lays bare the tragedy of Ticino, which has since become a tourist “paradise”, where many German-speaking Swiss have their holiday homes; a transit area for cross-Alpine traffic; and a centre of off-shore wealth management (Lugano particularly). A requiem for a way of life that has died.

The challenge for the translator is finding the right “voice” for the narrator, as the language is deceptively simple. A knowledge of the local topography and culture is of course important, especially in understanding the dialect words used by the author. Martini was largely self-taught, having attended teacher-training school but not university, but read widely. Critics particularly note the influence of the Italian writers Beppe Fenoglio (*La Malora*) and Cesare Pavese (*La Luna e i Falò*).

There remains the problem of choosing a title. “Il fondo del sacco” means, literally, the bottom of the bag. This refers to the narrator’s intention in telling the story to “get everything off his chest” (*svuotare il sacco*) but also to the toughness of life in the Val Bavona (scraping the bottom of the barrel).

With the current interest in family history, the book might particularly appeal to the descendants of Italian-speaking emigrants (whether Swiss or Italian) whose ancestors sought an escape from poverty and a better life overseas. It might also give some perspective to the current debate on migration and identity, in Europe and elsewhere.

The translator

Simon Knight lives partly in the UK and partly in Italy. He has a special interest in writers from Italian-speaking Switzerland and has been funded by the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia to translate an anthology of the poetry of Fabio Pusterla (Arc publications, Visible Poets series, due to appear April 2012).

A Pro Helvetia grant is also available to fund a translation of Plinio Martini’s work into English. The translator has already translated all but the last few chapters of the novel. He recently visited the Val Bavona, where most of the novel is set.

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The publisher is already in possession of an English translation of the novel, made by Simon Knight.