British Reactions to Silone (with particular reference to *Fontamara*)

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The late 1920’s and early 1930’s are not remembered with particular nostalgia in western Europe. In Britain, the general public was coping as best it could with the problems of the Depression while the government, guided by its Diplomatic Service, did its best to maintain the image of having everything under control at home and of having a monopoly of wisdom in world affairs. At Westminster, politicians were happy to give approval – albeit superficial approval – to those foreign regimes in which they could recognise a reassuring appearance of order and stability. Such an attitude merely disguised either an appalling level of ignorance or an inability to read the signs of the times – perhaps it was a bit of both. The Fascist regime in Italy was presented as respectable, even by Winston Churchill, and in August 1927 *The London Times* stated that “the Corporative State offers greater opportunities than the Liberal State.” It was so easy to simplify: Hitler and Mussolini were anti-Communist, therefore Fascism must pose less of a threat to the British ruling class than Marxist Socialism or even democratic Socialism. The convenient attitude of the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, and the Foreign Minister, Samuel Hoare, as well as some members of the Royal Family, was to side with Hitler. George Orwell analysed this aspect of British life in caustic, condemnatory tones:

Tossed to and fro between their incomes and their principles, it was impossible that men like Chamberlain should do anything but make the worst of both worlds [...]. What is to be expected of them is not treachery or physical cowardice, but stupidity; unconscious sabotage, an infallible instinct for doing the wrong thing [...]. They are not wicked, or altogether wicked, they are merely unteachable.” ("England" 83)

It is always easy for succeeding generations to be wise when they have the knowledge of hindsight, but nevertheless, we have to remember that the British people had no first-hand experience of Fascism: it was seen as a European phenomenon. Consequently, it was hardly surprising that in the 1930’s no English writer produced a lasting work containing an incisive comment on the contemporary political scene in Europe. In his essay on Koestler, Orwell wrote:
Some of the outstanding figures in this school of [political] writers are Silone, Malraux, Salvemini, Borkenau, Victor Serge and Koestler himself. Some of these are imaginative writers, some not; but they are all alike in that they are trying to write contemporary history, but unofficial history, the kind that is ignored in the text-books and lied about in the newspapers. Also they are all alike in being continental Europeans (271).

Since no British writer had personal experience of life in a totalitarian regime, they did not produce what Orwell called “concentration-camp literature”: “the special world created by secret police forces, censorship of opinion, torture, and frame-up trials is, of course, known-about and to some extent disapproved of, but it has made very little emotional impact” (272). This background helps to explain why no English writer could have written Silone’s Fontamara any more than he could have written Koestler’s Darkness at Noon. By the same token, a slave-trader could not have written Harriet Beecher-Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

But British intellectuals did play a vital role in the dissemination of information about the contemporary scene in Europe and in Italy, in particular. They did so in Universities, in the press, in literary journals and through left-wing political organisations. They were indeed a formidable group even if, as foreigners, their discontent with the existing order inevitably belonged to the world of ideas rather than experience. Many of these enlightened individuals are still household names, from G.M. Trevelyan and Stephen Spender to Cecil Springe, Rome Correspondent of the Guardian from 1923 until he was expelled by Mussolini; also his wife Sylvia, Assistant Diplomatic Correspondent of Reuters; Melvin Lasky, editor of Encounter (similar to Silone’s Tempo Presente); John Lehmann, founder of New Writing; Michael Foot; Richard Crossman; Malcolm Muggeridge; Victor Gollancz, founder of the Left Book Club (1936) – to name but a few.

Looking back, we can be proud of the fact that a few months after Mussolini’s entry into the war on the side of Hitler in June 1940, the core group of these British intellectuals formed the Friends Of Free Italy (1941), later the British Italian Society. Writing in 1981 about the origins of this Society, Ivor Bulmer-Thomas said: “We met from time to time to consider what could be done” – that last phrase echoing, consciously or unconsciously, the question Silone asked so many times in Fontamara: “Che fare?”, and it was asked in the same spirit of collaboration to promote social justice.  

In 1934 when Fontamara first appeared in Eric Mosbacher’s masterly English translation, it captured the attention of the intelligentsia mentioned above and it also caught the mood of growing unease and disillusionment prevalent in Britain at that time. Silone’s political criticism in Fontamara and in his subsequent books was an eye-opener to British readers and, con-
veniently, the scene was set in a small town in southern Italy, sufficiently remote to pose no obvious threat to the British authorities. Graham Greene was one of the first to write about the significance of Silone’s first disarmingly simple novel. In his review in the *Spectator* Greene said:

In *Fontamara* we are not concerned with eternal issues, we are down in the mud and blood, the injustice and ignominy of the present. The story of an obscure Italian village, “about 100 ragged, shapeless, one-floor hovels”, is the most moving account of fascist barbarity I have yet read; it is told simply, in the first person, as if by one of the peasants: how the villagers of Fontamara were driven by suffering at the hands of swindling landowners and corrupt administrators to a useless tragic revolt against the State. In the novel only an old man, his wife and son escaped abroad to tell the story to Signor Silone of how the Blackshirts came to Fontamara:

In parte, come poi si riseppe con più precisione, erano tra essi anche sensali, di quelli che si vedono sui mercati, e anche lavapiatti delle taverne, e anche barbari, cocchieri di case private, suonatori ambulanti. Gente fiacca e, di giorno, vile. Gente servizievole verso i proprietari, ma a patto di avere l’immunità nelle cattiverie contro i poveri. Gente senza scrupoli. Gente che una volta veniva da noi a portarci gli ordini di don Circostanza per le elezioni e ora veniva con i fucili per farci la guerra. Gente senza famiglia, senza onore, senza fede, gente infida, poveri ma nemici dei poveri. (138)

Graham Greene concluded his review by saying: “This book should be read to its merciless end by all who believe that there are different brands of Fascism and that the Italian trade mark is any better than the swastika.”

The British Government capitalised on *Fontamara* as a propaganda tool when they commissioned a war edition of 20,000 copies in Italian for distribution to Italian prisoners of war held by British authorities. Silone’s second book, *Vino e pane*, was distributed in the same way. These were pirated editions of Silone’s uncorrected draft version, published in London by Jonathan Cape (1942) without either Silone’s knowledge or permission. It was unfortunate that copies of this unauthorised edition were the first to be seen by the Italian literary world, some of whom were only too happy to use them to discredit Silone’s reputation in Italy after the war. (This was particularly true of Communist intellectuals for whom Silone was a renegade.)

Silone’s unambiguous, detailed descriptions in *Fontamara* of the real face of a *squadrista* (fascist thug) are prime examples of Orwell’s “unofficial history” which would never have appeared in either a text-book or a newspaper:

Questi uomini in camicia nera, d’altroonde, noi li conoscevamo. Per farsi coraggio essi avevano bisogno di venire di notte. La maggior parte puzzavano di vino, eppure a guardarli da vicino, negli occhi, non osavano sostenere lo sguardo. Anche loro erano
povera gente. Ma una categoria speciale di povera gente, senza terra, senza mestieri, o con molti mestieri, che è lo stesso, ribelli al lavoro pesante; troppo deboli e vili per ribellarasi ai ricchi e alle autorità, essi preferivano di servirsi per ottenere il permesso di rubare e opprimere gli altri poveri, i cafoni, i fittavoli, i piccoli proprietari. Incontrandoli per strada e di giorno, essi erano umili e ossequiosi, di notte e in gruppo cattivi, malvagi, traditori. Sempre essi erano stati al servizio di chi comanda e sempre lo saranno. Ma il loro raggruppamento in un esercito speciale, con una divisa speciale, e un armamento speciale, era una novità di pochi anni. Sono essi i cosiddetti fascisti. (139)

Within such an unambiguously damning description, Silone inserted an even more telling remark: “Sempre essi erano stati al servizio di chi comanda e sempre lo saranno.” This sentence makes it clear that Fontamara was not just an anti-Fascist book, although without Fascism it would not have had such initial appeal. In Britain little was known about the author and, for his part, Silone had only reached the stage of being able to produce his first reflections on the disillusionment and deep suffering of his recent past. Of course he was anti-Fascist, but he was also an international revolutionary at odds with the power structure of the modern bureaucratic state as he had experienced it; and it was as such that he criticised the “fascist aspect” of all institutions whether the label read Catholic, parliamentary, reformist, Soviet, or unashamedly authoritarian, as in Italy where the aim was to drug the population into a state of inert dependence. In England George Orwell realised the need to analyse the meaning of Fascism in Silone’s wider context. He soon found that in the years between 1933 and 1943 every identifiable group had been called ‘Fascist’ at one time or another: Conservatives, Socialists, Communists, Trotskyists, Catholics, war resisters, supporters of war, and nationalists, with the result that Fascism had become an entirely meaningless term to be equated with cruel, unscrupulous, arrogant, anti-liberal, and anti-working class, or simply ‘bully’. It was precisely this level of awareness that Silone wished to communicate.

In fact, by attempting to make sense of his own position and at the same time help others to understand what was happening in contemporary Europe, Silone was challenging politicians and intellectuals to re-examine their fundamental attitude to social and political problems. He wanted to make people ask critical questions about the underlying values and direction of their society and he wanted to show its human face. This is why in Fontamara he gave the centre of the stage to the peasants, “i cafoni,” – a word which he used with great respect to mean the poor in Italy who had to believe, obey and fight for their Duce; in a wider context, this “carne abituata a soffrire” represented slighted human dignity, the underdog, the mass of the population which never changes the world over:
Foreign readers identified more readily with this description than Italians whose instinctive reaction was to feel insulted at being called “cafoni.” (Salvemini’s comment that the peasants in Fontamara were at times “too stupid or insufficiently human” was one such defensive reaction although he later qualified it. [Origo 213-16]) But Silone knew perfectly well that his “contadini poveri” did not just come from southern Italy: they were the same the world over; he had spoken to their condition. Many English writers, among them, Iris Origo, have drawn attention to Silone’s ironic picture of the social hierarchy in the area around Fontamara, the greater part of which was owned by Prince Torlonia:

“In capo a tutti c’è Dio, padrone del cielo. Questo ognuno lo sa.
Poi viene il principe Torlonia, padrone della terra. 
Poi vengono le guardie del principe. 
Poi vengono i cani delle guardie del principe. 
Poi, nulla. 
Poi, ancora nulla. 
Poi, ancora nulla. 
Poi vengono i cafoni. 
E si può dire ch’è finito.”

“Ma le autorità dove le metti?” chiese ancora più irritato il forestiero. 
“Le autorità” intervenne a spiegare Ponzio Pilato “si dividono tra il terzo e il quarto posto. Secondo la paga. Il quarto posto (quello dei cani) è immenso. Questo ognuno lo sa.” (35)

Such a powerful political statement was not missed by Silone’s many foreign readers in the 1930’s and 40’s. Here was the truly independent mind of someone who, as a young man, could easily have been identified with Berardo, the central character in Fontamara, in his frustration and helplessness in the face of the brick wall of the all-powerful Church and State authorities. Silone’s decision to join the Italian Communist Party in 1921 and to leave it in 1931 were decisions “costing not less than everything” (Eliot 59) because he was following an ideal in which he believed. It required that he abandon that way of life which always advocated self-interest: “ ‘Pensa ai fatti tuoi’, raccomandava ogni donna di Fontamara al suo uomo. [...] ‘Lascia che si compromettano gli altri’ ” (74). In the decade from 1921 Silone gradually began to see what Michael Foot called “the face of a kind of Communism which might be as pitiless in practice as Fascism itself. A witness, like Silone within the ranks
of the Communist Party, was so horrified by what he saw that he knew he would have to speak out or lose his integrity” (Foot). But it was only after he had freed himself from the limitations of strict adherence to an ideology, that Silone was gradually able to read the signs of the times and then communicate his findings in a way that could be understood immediately by educated and uneducated alike.

He very cleverly allowed for two levels of response to Fontamara: the immediate, topical, anti-Fascist one which inevitably led the reader to a more profound awareness, namely that Fontamara’s experience was representative of contemporary Europe. When Silone asked the question “Che fare?” he was really asking for a critical re-examination of fundamental social and political issues; he was trying to make his readers see that Marxist-Socialism and Fascism as well as the ever-prevailing democratic structures had failed to achieve human rights and social justice.

The reader of Fontamara would never have guessed that in 1930, at the time of writing, Silone was at his lowest point: he was seriously ill and penniless; he had no immediate family (his only remaining brother, Romolo, imprisoned in the Penitentiary in Procida for a crime that he did not commit, died on 27th October 1932 as a result of Fascist brutality); he was living in exile in Switzerland, having been banned from Italy, France and Spain; he admitted that he was on the brink of suicide, although later he recognised that there was a positive side to his suffering: “Attraversai in quell’epoca una crisi atroce, ma salvatrice. [...] In Svizzera io sono diventato uno scrittore; ma quello che più vale, sono diventato un uomo” (Memoriale 10). He needed a decade to reflect, reconstruct his life and develop his highly specialised ear. Silone used this personal experience when he described Pietro Spina’s moment of self-awareness during his period in hiding in the stable:

di là sono uscito, se non completamente trasformato, certo spoglio nudo. Mi sembra che, fino a quel giorno, io non sia stato me stesso, ma abbia rappresentato una parte, come un attore a teatro, accociandomi perfino una maschera adeguata e declamando le formule prescritte. (Il seme 257)

It was thanks to this period in Switzerland and the individuals whom he met there that unlike many of his ex-compagni, this ex-communist did not disintegrate; instead, to quote Michael Foot, “he set about purifying his Socialist faith.” The first hint of this change, of this new awareness, is seen in Berardo’s reflections the night before he died:

“E se io muoio? Sarò il primo cafone che non muore per sé, ma per gli altri.”

Questa era la sua grande scoperta. Questa parola gli fece sbarrare gli occhi, come se una luce abbagliante fosse entrata nella cella.

Mai dimenticherò il suo sguardo, la sua voce in quelle ultime parole.
Berardo had suddenly realised that his personal sacrifice, his death in prison, would pave the way towards changing the structure of society in Fontamara. This flash of awareness brought him serenity. Similarly, it was his inner conviction which gave Silone the strength to carry on through those dark days. It also helped him to reformulate his profound faith in socialism; but it was a socialism freed from ideologies, which depended for its success on values, personal commitment and acceptance of responsibility. His aggiornamento of an age-old principle gradually became crystal clear with time and the appearance of his other literary and political writings, notably La scuola dei dittatori (1938), Il seme sotto la neve (1941) and Una manciata di more (1952). The first of these, La scuola dei dittatori, published in English in 1939, proved beyond doubt that Silone was a sophisticated, fearless, political commentator who, with biting sarcasm, was prepared to criticise democracies and dictatorships alike. Michael Foot called La scuola dei dittatori "the Principe of the 20th Century." It influenced him so much that he wrote a very clever 82-page satire based on Silone’s work which he entitled The Trial of Mussolini. (Using the pseudonym Cassius, this volume was published by Victor Gollancz in 1943 and subsequently translated into Italian and published in Italy.)

In his introduction to The God that failed Richard Crossman presented Silone’s autobiographical essay which describes his entry into the Communist Party in 1921 and exit from it in 1931, as the work of a man whose analysis marked him as a possible prophet of this era: “if history proves him right, all is well and his ‘sacrifice’, his stance will be praised by all and sundry.” In 1971, I remember asking Silone the naive question: “Are you not sad and disillusioned because the contemporary world does not want to listen to you?” His disarming reply was: “Oh no. I know they will listen to me, and before the end of this century. It will be after my death, but that is irrelevant. What matters is that people will pay attention. That is what makes my life worthwhile.” The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of Communism have shown that Crossman was correct in recognising the characteristics of the prophet in Silone. It also shows that Silone’s own judgement was amazingly accurate. To show the way and inspire others to follow is the hallmark of the prophet. In the British context, Michael Foot has no doubt that Silone first found the path which writers like George Orwell and Arthur Koestler were later to follow and both Orwell and Koestler are but two British-based writers who were ready to acknowledge the prophetic nature of Silone’s contribution to 20th century thought.

Critics rightly trace the thread of Silone’s ideas back to Fontamara and when his work is viewed as a whole and when Fontamara is considered
within that perspective, its prophetic nature can be recognised in a way that would have been impossible in 1934. The reader is able to see that “Silone’s life and work have illuminated our epoch, helped us to understand better its grim aspects, and left a legacy for a younger generation to continue the struggle for cultural freedom” (Labedz). This struggle is still with us. Silone achieved not only international literary fame but also a fraternity of readers who felt they could identify with him personally. This is something intangible and unquantifiable but it is lasting and most precious to a writer. Kenneth Allsop described how he was reminded of Orwell during a meeting with Silone in Rome: “the battered, lined melancholy, the haggard reflective sombreness that is occasionally dispelled by a sudden radiant smile” and he ended his reflection with the telling comment: “it is a brother’s face” (49). On a recent journey from Glasgow to London I found myself sitting beside a nervous, elderly man, a Scottish “cafone”, who had never flown before. Out of politeness I had to listen to his life history and when that subject was exhausted, he turned his attention to what I was reading – a book on Dante. He commented dryly: “I do not know anything about Dante; the only Italian author I have ever read was Silone. He wrote a wonderful book called Fontamara. Have you ever heard of it?”

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NOTES

1 The phrase was the title of a novel written in prison by Cernysevskij (1863), one of the first Russian revolutionary leaders. The phrase was also used in 1902 by Lenin as the title of one of his first revolutionary tracts and in 1886 by Tolstoy, with a slight variation. Its origin can be traced, significantly, to St. Luke’s gospel.

2 The first Italian edition of Fontamara, authorised by Silone, was published in 1947 (ed. Faro), a revised edition in 1949 (ed. Mondadori), and the final revised edition (ed. Mondadori) in 1953.

WORKS CITED