

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Footnotes

Reg Taylor

Adriana knelt on the tarmac when they got off the plane and announced, ‘At last I’ve come back to my Italy,’ before starting to point out things around them in the failing light. It made them late for the bus, whose bad tempered driver drove faster and faster once they got on the freeway, before leaning out when they had to stop at lights to shake a fist– ‘*Cornuto!*’ – in a neighbouring driver’s face.

Who growled in response: both vehicles’ gears ground, they edged forward sportily, pelting through unhistoric suburbs, shuddering lights and deepening darkness. They had nowhere to sleep and these people were barely civilized, he realised.

But a neat little man, ‘Excuse me – you are English?’ came to their rescue after they were unloaded, picking his way through a ring of black faces and flashing his I.D.

‘I am from the Tourist Bureau,’ he assured them. ‘Allow me to recommend a very good hotel.’

At a price that made Adriana explode. Too much a gentleman to retort in kind, the man made mollifying noises. ‘Consider your husband...’

She had a sheet of paper out. ‘The bastard’s trying to cheat us’ – she stabbed the list – ‘he says a hundred euros – down here it’s got seventy’ –

‘So it’s out of date,’ George said. ‘You heard where he’s from.’

‘He’s not. He’s a pimp, I tell you.’

‘I don’t care anymore.’ He turned to the embarrassed official who was shrugging in disappointment (‘I wish only to assist’) and asked: ‘Where is the joint mate?’

‘You like a taxi?’

‘No,’ Adriana insisted, picking up suitcases. ‘The bastard’ll try to peel us off for another hundred.’ And she led the way past weary walls and huddles of sinister appraisers, through a tiny floodlit park whose few shrubs clung together, wide awake under their own dusty leaves – and insisted on a *passeggiata* even after they’d reached the sanctuary of the hotel; pausing in the middle of a pedestrian crossing while toy cars yapped at them for a good look round.

‘So what do you think of Rome my darling?’ she asked.

‘I wish we hadn’t come.’

But next morning, opening the shutters to a courtyard full of foreign washing and the smell of coffee he felt better. In the dining room downstairs each new arrival was greeted formally and responded in kind, while the little girl serving them lingered over her farewells.

‘What’s she so unhappy about?’

‘She’s not. It’s just the way we talk.’ Even Adriana’s voice, reliably raised in rancour, had modulated overnight. ‘They say the Pope is saying Mass. Do you want to go?’

‘Not really.’

‘And guess who I saw on duty at the desk this morning? Your mate from last

night – pretended not to know me, cunt.’

Satisfied now, she led him round the city that in a day or two they would make theirs. Restored by the few hours’ intermission cars drove with furious courtesy; flashing lights, remonstrating, outraged by others’ presumptions, and occasionally slapping against each other without appearing to cause their owners much more distress.

‘How can they park like that,’ he asked, ‘one behind the other?’

‘The ones behind,’ she explained, ‘are only staying for a little while.’

The old city was in poor shape, he soon realised. High up in the Colosseum on scaffolding some men – probably thinking of the job in front of them – were picking half-heartedly at the stonework. Remembering Australia’s reputation for being good jet lagged observers, he tried hard, looking across the de-lioned interior, to record some sense of awe ...and noted an invidious similarity to a football ground back home.

‘The gloss of Time and Restoration undoes History,’ he noted in his diary.

‘Find myself increasingly more interested in people’s use of them than in the buildings themselves.’

More interested certainly in the apparitions of women in these grubby streets; in furs splashed with scarves and with masses of hair framing oval faces. Cowering in his serviceable Australian parka he shot covert glances at them before they were lost to some niche.

‘See another fur coat and I’ll scream,’ Adriana muttered enviously.

She was nervous about meeting her older sister again. ‘She was always so shy, introverted’ – she said, though Aurora, delicately scented and with large eyes brimming, crushed them to her unreservedly when they got to the station. Then, once she’d got them home and while her husband Gianni busied himself in the kitchen, she hovered over her guests, unable to take her melting eyes away. She held his hands, constantly seeking reassurance– ‘*Ti piace, sei contento?*’ struggling with his name, ‘*Giorgio, no?*’ – sighing with pleasure at having them both.

Next morning Gianni heaved up the shutters and rebuked them for sleeping so late. The sun burst in – out on the balcony the morning was crisp; there were red roofs gleaming dewily, and beyond the hills cradling the town, real mountains capped with snow. ‘*Bella Italia, no?*’ Gianni demanded.

‘*Bella Italia, si,*’ he could only murmur in reply.

‘Feel this strange, almost spiritual sense of belonging,’ his diary recorded enthusiastically.

If Aurora’s own mood was a little more subdued. She had some health problem that precluded an immediate excursion next morning and some of the first night’s sparkle was lost. He had to suppress his own impatience in a mostly monosyllabic walk to the shop with Gianni, since his host’s English owed everything to the American occupation of Sicily after the War: ‘*A-son-of-a-bitch-a-fuck off.*’ The next day, in new clothes fitted with many a murmured ‘*Permesso?*’ from the porcelain-fragile shop assistant, George longed to take them somewhere, but Aurora’s complaint seemed a little worse. For a while it appeared as if it was always going to be too early, too late, or unseasonable to go anywhere, before, out of limbo, and in

failing light for his camera, people began adjusting thermostats, security screens, putting on coats and then, if not relapsing into seats for more food and drink, charging out into the dusk.

‘They’re my family darling,’ Adriana explained. ‘Try and understand.’

‘I do, I do – but, what’s going on?’

‘Well, I’m not really sure.’

One housebound weekend, not an English Sunday paper in sight, he sneaked out early. But behind him a shutter rattled, and the voice of that guardian against false hopes, Gianni, stalled him in his tracks, ‘No, it’s not good to walk, because...’ and, once he had his guest back inside, revealed his real reason for recalling him by showing off a wallful of his gift-shop landscapes and drawerfuls of knobbly hand hewn toys. The evening shaped up more promisingly when Gianni set up a screen to show off his home movies with Aurora’s approval. From the air of anticipation George thought they might be pornographic – but they turned out to be a catalogue of family highlights. In the telescoped years Aurora’s daughters bloomed from urchins to soubrettes to dutiful madonnas; strutting round parks nibbling pumpkin seeds, fluttering eyes skittishly in their father’s uncertain focus, lost and found on the impromptu screen. The dead were restored too – Adriana’s mother, expensively dressed but with a familiar look of discontent as if she was already fed up with immortality, threatened to raise the question of their father’s excesses – ‘Mamma’s jewels?’ It was too late to exhume them: touched by the fresh events before them the sisters both reached for his hand in the dark, found each other’s, and withdrew.

‘Got stuck alone with Aurora today,’ his diary more soberly noted. ‘Had a conversation of sorts. She said she was tired of Gianni, he was lazy, he had no feeling – did I ever think I could be happy with a woman like her perhaps?’

Though she only really seemed to be comfortable with her sister Adriana, striding round Italy like distracted water birds, almost equally haughty, bickering and complaining, glaring dissatisfiedly at monuments, and posing arm in arm like friends. While Adriana was absolutely content. Nothing had changed, she said. ‘When I think of my husband dragging me off’ – to the land of roast lamb and lumpy shoes – ‘do you wonder why I was so bitter – why I longed to come home?’

He wondered how their house in Australia was coping... In the middle of a dispute they were having with a builder over renovations Adriana had come home one day and announced, ‘We’re going to Italy’ –

‘But we can’t’ – he reasoned, gesturing at the mess around them, ‘this business, the house - ?’

‘Fuck the house,’ she said. ‘I want to see my father again before he dies.’

Aurora had raised her head when the question of catching up with their father was put, set her lips: not yet.

The fabled and possibly bogus *dottore* – haunter of graveyards, harbourer of partisans, dreamy, charming one handed bed maker – had gone downhill since their mother died, she reminded them; his eccentricities had become perverse. He was living in squalor, not bothering to eat, throwing away his money and blaming thieves. He’d even accused her of stealing once, made a statement to police; there’d been a

shameful interview –

‘But his pension ...the property?’ Adriana interposed.

‘ – All gone. *Dissipato.*’ Now that their brother, Benito – ‘He was born during the war, we call him Nino now’ – was coming from Germany they could do something as a family. Put the old man somewhere safe.

It was a slow trip up between belittling peaks to meet Adriana’s father. She wasn’t confident her brother could help when he arrived. ‘He was always such a sook – I had to bash up kids for him.’ Someone else might have been sent in his place to greet them in the hotel near their father’s apartment – a gangling figure, ejecting itself from a seat before resuming it with a growl, bending double to grin at and embrace his sister before reminding her how old she looked as if she was another of Italy’s deficiencies; tilting recklessly back and forth, while dominating conversation with an imperious forefinger that admitted no argument. Gianni smiled wanly. Nino’s wife, Waltraut, was blonde and lovely, full of soft throaty murmurs, ill- fated requests, patient scoldings ...and didn’t appear altogether happy.

Nino had no heart for the job in hand, but relented enough to bully them into his car. They found the cheap and cheerless flats in a patch of scuffed up grass. Through the door of one they saw washing or unwashed clothes piled on a radiator inside and yellow sheets on an unmade bed. The kitchen table was heaped with tomes, long life milk and moribund biscuits; a single globe drooped from some string under the ceiling. Aurora’s nostrils flared in the frizzy glow; she clucked, beyond dismay.

‘*Povero Papa*’,’ Adriana sighed to her husband. ‘My mother used to keep him

so clean. Shirts always starched, suits pressed – now ... where could he be?’

‘Anywhere,’ Aurora shrugged. ‘He just goes – forgets ...’

Nino chuckled grimly. ‘On the mountain perhaps?’ He started to tell them about some time he’d come looking for his father – flopping down on a hillside when he finally sighted him, and saluting him, ‘Ciao, Napoleon,’ as his father strode on past.

Aurora pouted. The landlady opened her door an inch. Voices were raised: ‘The bitch isn’t saying much,’ Adriana translated. ‘You can bet she’s been fleecing him too.’

Then their father appeared. Tall and spare, an old hat on his head, tie done up under a dirty collar, overcoat dangling on his rangy frame, he looked round uncertainly at these strangers in his home before sitting down to take off a shoe; smiling, if puzzled, when his daughter hugged him. ‘Your daughter from Australia. Do you remember me Papa?’ She looked imploringly at Aurora: ‘God, he doesn’t know me.’

Aurora could only shrug as the old man took a pocket knife to his shoe.

‘Australia,’ Adriana tried again; ‘*Ah, si si*’ – her father scolded himself, downing tools to study her. ‘*E come e’ il Presidente Whitlam?*’ ‘*Bene, Papa*’, *bene, si...*’ She started to cry – the old man was touched by her confusion...

Aurora wasn’t going to be distracted though. ‘Papa’, why haven’t you been paying your rent? Your money – your bank book – what have you been doing?’

Her father responded to this torrent of enquiries by going very slowly through all his pockets, turning out and examining his wallet, army discharge papers,

newspaper cuttings. ‘He must have some of his pension left,’ Aurora said. He fumbled with delicate, dark skinned fingers, surprised himself with the discovery of a note – ‘Ah...’

‘And where is the rest?’

He looked round him for the vagrant currency.

Aurora turned to him: ‘He’ll lose this too’ – and held it up so they could all be witness.

‘Never thought I’d see Papa’ like this,’ Adriana murmured. She introduced her new husband and the old man looked interested. ‘He says, “What happened to the old one?”’ she translated.

Aurora was becoming impatient. Her father was being obtuse; they searched his desk, shifting pressed flowers, birds’ feathers and ancient correspondence round, while old man made reassuring noises.

‘He’s always been the same, you know,’ Adriana explained. ‘Nothing was too important – everything would be alright – “*Ma si, va bene...*” he’d say. He used to make my mother scream.’

The sounds Aurora was making might have been familiar: he sniggered as she started going through his pockets. Nino glared out the window at a passerby – his wife, Waltraut – going back to the car, while Gianni tried reason, reminding his father-in-law of his obligations, the authority he should sign perhaps ... gave him a pen even.

A change came over the old man’s face at the sight of it. The sensual mouth curved down; his head went back. The bank book, he pointed out, was not lost – its

money was his – who could he trust in these uncertain times? His eyes glittered with a hint of pride.

Poor Aurora, with the memory of the recent calumny her father had visited on her revived, lost patience. His daughter might wash her hands of him, he was told; she'd relinquished her duties, privileges – disowned him. She stormed out into the darkness, Nino yanking at light switches, while the old man was trying to give them a tour.

'Get in, get in –' the family screamed as Adriana was saying goodbye. Her father was inviting her to call again, bring children if she had any – '*Andiamo Adriana, andiamo!*' Aurora screamed in tears of temper.

'He had a malignant look in his eyes,' the neglected diary noted (or was it malicious?)

'*Povero Papa*', Adriana shook her head. 'He must be getting old.'

Next day they were better organised. There was a rush to the Social Security Office for fresh documents before the siesta: 'The *maestro* has lost so many,' the exasperated staff reminded them; another dash to the Post Office when the old man recalled he hadn't collected his last cheque (the amused teller greeting Napoleon warmly for the second time that week). Aurora was beside herself. She dragged them all off to the Welfare Office, with Napoleon commenting on points of interest along the way. The *Signori* should realise, they were told, that an attempt had been made to help with domestic tasks, meals – he had driven them away.

'That's my father,' Adriana said, 'he'd think, "What are these bitches

meddling here for?” Show them the door – “*Vai, vai.*”

Aurora wasn't giving in though. They went to inspect an old folks' home high grey flats set on safe green slopes.

‘It was lovely inside,’ Adriana said. ‘So clean. They said he must understand his movements would be restricted...He'd hate it.’

The old man was nodding approval.

‘I don't care if he hates it,’ Aurora said. ‘He can endure it.’

Nino took them all for a brotherly drive before he left for Germany, spending most of his time drawing invidious comparisons between Italy and his adopted home.

‘The bastard's turned into a Kraut,’ Adriana said – his ear was cupped – ‘and he's deaf,’ while the pacific Waltraut kept alternating English, German and Italian CDs in an effort to appease everybody.

That evening, after extorting directions from a pedestrian, Nino took them to dinner. He was restless, getting up two or three times to retrieve family photos and presents from the car; in his brutal way insisting on paying for everything. Seated, he looked with short sighted disgust at the menu before pushing it away, putting on Adriana's glasses, and then feeling for them inside the empty case. He twitched, glaring at the sulky Aurora as if trying to place her, looking dangerously at his Australian guest when he put an arm round Waltraut for a family photo (she came closer anyway – they were both strangers here) and saving his last hostile scrutiny of the clientele for when they were getting up to leave.

Aurora was in the middle of a big announcement, reminding them that tomorrow she would be collecting the old man and all his things. ‘And this time you

will remember Mamma's furs?' Nino snapped. 'Or are they already packed?'

But next day Napoleon was missing. He had an appalling image of the old man floundering in snow drifts in his mountains – the doughtiest of St Bernards flinching from the blast – but that night they caught sight of his lean silhouette pacing away from the darkened flat.

Adriana gave chase, 'Papa' – Napoleon!' and made a fuss, but once back inside her father was the perfect host, fossicking for candle stubs and making them sit – 'I do enough' – hands drifting in and out of his pockets as he stood near the wall – hat on – swaying tolerantly, '*Ah si, si,*' his shadow like a brooding witness to his daughter's story, and only interrupting when he caught sight of their new umbrella. His own had been stolen – '*Il Siciliano*' – he hinted darkly. 'He says the Sicilian, Gianni, steals them all,' Adriana said. He kept testing the mechanism that flung the umbrella open as they strode down the street.

People made room for them on the footpath – 'Think what would happen if the earth did not move' – Napoleon reminded his guests, keen to show them off in his local café once he'd put the umbrella safely aside. 'Take the *maestro* home with you,' two ladies suggested. 'He's so lonely here.' But the old man seemed much restored; posing for photos, proud and tearful; pressing his bristly cheeks – 'til tomorrow' – against them when they left, and striding after the bus with a firm hand, minus another umbrella, raised in salute, as if he knew where they were all going.

To a strange house...where they drank enough, as the jet lagged do, to sleep. On the edge of unconsciousness though, something – fundamental – intruded, jarring him

awake. He sat up straining, but the house was still. Adriana (worn out from carting him home, she said – ‘next time I leave you’ – murmured something in her sleep). Things seemed to be falling into place.

He dreamt.

Of the river, ‘so cold even in summer,’ near the deserted mine. Adriana showed him her father’s old office nearby – ‘I used to come in and catch him playing draughts’ – but their house was neglected. She knocked but wouldn’t go in when some slatternly looking piece answered the door.

‘If my mother could see it ...’ Adriana sighed. She waited till they found her old school friend’s place, and they went upstairs, drinking coffee with her till he noticed something, drizzle or sleet, that thickened, slowed outside.

‘You have brought the snow,’ they were told. All afternoon they watched the soft, painstaking flakes find purchase on walls and rooftops in the little town, and made sentimental plans: they’d buy the old house and after they’d tucked the old man in for the night sneak out for a walk under street lights liltng in the gentle fall...Sitting for a while as her father used to do in the *Osteria*, while they were exchanging leisurely courtesies with its owner...

Knowing they would never be as happy.