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### **Title**

Revelli, Nuto, *L'anello forte (La donna: storie di vita contadina)*

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natural Paola of the closing shots of *La Dolce Vita*. Although Edward Murray has not added significantly to his initial project, the text remains a valuable and sound introduction to the great maestro and his work up to 1976. Despite the new edition the closing sentence of the text has yet to be corrected: “*ciao, il poeta*” should be of course “*ciao, poeta.*”

Peggy Kidney, *UCLA*

REVELLI, NUTO, *L'anello forte (La donna: storie di vita contadina)*, Torino: Einaudi, 1985, pp. 95 (intro.) + 502.

Nuto Revelli's seminal work as a pioneer oral historian over the past several decades, documenting *contadino* culture in Northern Italy (specifically the Cuneo area) is of the highest caliber. It presents a reality often obfuscated, either by the Romantics of the last century and their presentday epigones, or by the radical left which insists on countering excessively rosy portraits with equally distorted visions of unmitigated bleakness. R. corrects such misconceptions and misrepresentations through the only legitimate means: direct interviewing of that strata of society—"vinti" only insofar as these people follow a way of life largely superseded by modern society and its *ragion di mercatura*. Yet, balanced as his microbiographies may seek to be, there is no glossing over the fact that the overall mosaic or portrait of life they form is essentially dark: the depopulation of the countryside, the utter and abject poverty and isolation of scattered and aging *contadini* eking out an existence in a landscape the uncaring observer would call abandoned. R. is haunted by this dying culture, the tragedy of the broken lines of culture's transmission between generations, the desecration of a traditional way of life due to urbanization, blind industrialization, the power of mass culture, political indifference and ignorance (both of the right and the left).

The theme of war, an obsession for well over 20 years, prompted R. to seek out the truth as told by the forgotten world of the *contadini*. W.W.II remained everywhere present decades after the fact; its psychological and economic wounds had not healed. To R., a former officer, the massacres, the lunar landscape of the Russian retreat were

memories rekindled: a dusty crust of bread, like a Proustian madeleine, sufficed to recall the hunger of years ago. Following *La strada del davai* (Torino, 1966), *L'ultimo fronte* (Torino, 1971), told in letters written by *alpini* to their families,<sup>1</sup> constitutes a precious testimony of the war as seen from "below." Where R. searched he discovered that the war remembered and the war of poverty lived, were intimately tied and that the "other" war, like the "other" side of the economic "miracle" of Italy's boom years, needed chronicling. Without wishing to create a myth of the old rural culture, nor to indict industry and "progress" wholesale, an equilibrium between agriculture and industry was a guiding ideal of those years invested in documenting *Il mondo dei vinti: testimonianze di vita contadina* (2 voll.: 1. la pianura, la collina; 2. la montagna, le langhe; Torino: Einaudi, 1977). These were the years in which R.'s work began to receive the wide acclaim and readership it merited. The volumes were soon followed by a photographic exhibit which eloquently portrayed the many faces of that world (cf. catalogue: *Immagine del « mondo dei vinti »*, photographed by Paola Agosti texts by Nuto R., Milano: Mazzotta, 1979). The highly readable and gripping 2–3 page first-person narratives vary greatly in tone and topic, and the convenient index of titles beckons the reader on: from pathos (*Sì, sappiamo di essere abbandonati; La mia stalla era piena di lacrime; Era già un lusso la polenta*), to black humour (*Io in guerra sparavo al cielo! Con la prepotenza non si acchiappano nemmeno le mosche*), to the surreal (*Mia madre mi ha venduta per poche pagnotte di pane*—referring to child labour practices; *Quante trecce ho tagliato a Udine!* referring to the practice of young girls selling their hair to wig makers for pay), to the literarily intriguing (*Ho letto Pavese e Fenoglio, anche quella è storia, è storia nostra* or better still *Quel rompiballe di D'Annunzio!*).

The predominance of war and political themes, which here form the circa 400-page distillate of thousands of hours of recorded interviews likely reflects the male perspective which heavily dominates. It became evident to Revelli—as it eventually does to any field researcher working especially in rural areas—that the female voice is often silent (or silenced) in deference to husbands, that it is «scontato che la parola spettasse all'uomo». *L'anello forte* was conceived to redress this imbalance, to seek out yet an "other" side of the truth as seen through

female eyes. This stout 600-page volume (with an important introduction by Revelli) should be considered a sequel to the *Mondo dei vinti*, with which it conforms in style and format. Like its predecessor, *L'anello forte* is a distillate of years' field research, intelligently edited, and with a rare sensitivity in handling the language problem. The largely dialect recordings are translated into Italian while retaining as much of the original syntax and idiosyncrasies as possible, yet where dialect and Italian are incompatible, or where there is a particularly significant phrase or term, the original is left in the text (in italics) and an Italian equivalent placed at the bottom of the page—these are not so frequent as to be distracting. [E.g. *L'è mac na fümela. Eh, l'è senza cua. U cugnom as perd*: 'È solo una femmina. Eh, e senza coda. Il cognome si perde'; *l'om 'd mia madona e le masnà*: 'l'uomo di mia suocera ed i bambini'; *matotal* 'bambina'; *vachêl* 'servo di campagna'; *ciabutin* 'piccolo podere'; *ciabra* 'vendetta contadina'.] A glossary would, nonetheless, have been very useful! It is daunting to note that six years of collecting, two of reordering the material went into this volume alone and that one hour of recording corresponds to approximately three hours of transcription—naturally justifying R's team of collaborators.

*L'anello forte* is rich and fascinating, revealing a reality of which surely few readers under fifty will be aware. The brutality of daily life—often the premise or substance of many a fairy tale—is not a fantasy for those born at the turn of the century, but a fact—only the happy ending would be fantasy! The autobiographies tell of the fear and ignorance about sexual relations, the shame of pregnancy even for married women, the fact that most women worked up till the moment of delivery (often alone in the fields), and later required absolution for their sin. They tell of incest, family tyrannies of all sorts (especially that of cohabitation with in-laws; conjugal sexual violence), arranged marriages, and the relatively recent phenomenon of "mixed marriages," that is, the unscrupulous 'trade' of Southern women to older Northern bachelors promoted by "piazziisti," men who sold photographs (with addresses) of eligible women (many mere girls) extolling their virtues as hard workers who complained little and were happy with minimal comforts—in sum, the stuff of excellent farm wives. These women (and the recent emigration from the South in general), R.

credits with revitalizing the *contadino* culture of the North—but at great personal cost! This phenomenon creates a curious first in the history of Italy—« la storia delle due Italie contadine che si incontrano ». High infant mortality, large families and child labour (beginning often at the tender age of 5) are particularly wrenching: children were actually auctioned in Barcelonnette (France) or Prazzo (Italy) once a year by their parents to work as herders, servants or gatherers, and were not infrequently mistreated or starved by their employers. Resorting to selling one's braids, or hiring oneself out as a wet nurse were other attempts at acquiring income. The testimonies regard the widest range of topics from diet (essentially polenta, potatoes and chestnuts), to the various wars (« Anche noi abbiamo fatto la guerra »), to the practice and forms of magic and healing, to emigration (especially to France which was, until the Fascist era, considered a second country to the Cuneensi), to politics.

« Saper ascoltare è un 'mestiere' che stanca, che logora » R. confesses, but, judging from a commitment that spans decades, R. is indeed indefatigable. He is also acutely aware of professional ethics to which others, unfortunately, only pay lip-service: « Tra le regole che mi impongo quella del rispetto umano è la regola che osservo con più rigore. » Hence, anonymity where a testimony may compromise the interviewee, hence open *dialogue* rather than sterile questionnaire or barrage of rapid-fire questioning (the supposed “aseptic” interview, R. rightly notes, is a mirage). R. is sympathetic to the culture without being cloying, honest in his objectives and not afraid to cast negative judgment (on ‘piazziisti’ or anti-South bigots) or positive (on the strong, affirmative Southern woman); he is compassionate while retaining a certain pragmatism about the ‘solutions’ to the *contadino/operaio* problem. R.’s is a deeply pondered *oeuvre* which resists the facile conclusions of the “paracadutisti,” those numerous dilettanti and scholars alike who presume to know all before they hit ground!

R.’s work is no less a monument to those communities whose story it finally tells, than it is a rich source of ‘data’ for scholars of all sorts, from folklorists to social historians. In any case, it is sure to move—as it did this reader.

Luisa Del Giudice, *UCLA*

## Notes

1. cf. also the recent collective Emilian study by Fabio Foresti, Paola Morisi, Maria Resca (ed.), *Era come a mietere*, S. Giovanni in Persiceto, 1983, and for Lombardy: Sandro Fontana, Maurizio Pieretti (ed.), *La Grande Guerra* (Operai e contadini lombardi nel primo conflitto mondiale), [Mondo popolare in Lombardia, Vol. 9].

DE' MEDICI, LORENZO, *Ambra (Descriptio Hiemis)*. Introduzione, testo e commento a cura di Rossella Bessi. Firenze, Sansoni, 1986, pp. 132.

Reduce da un impegnativo cimento con i quattro testi noti della *Nencia da Barberino* (pubblicata presso la Salerno Editrice nell'82), e dopo aver pausato l'esercizio della filologia in atto con un'opera manualistica (la sicura *Guida alla filologia italiana* scritta con un partner del valore di Mario Martelli è dell'84), Rossella Bessi compie una nuova, felice ricognizione nell'area culturale laurenziana. La sua edizione critica dell'enigmatico poemetto del Magnifico, ora persuasivamente datato ad uno degli anni disponibili tra il 1474 e il 1485, si raccomanda per più ragioni: per l'accurato confronto dei testimoni manoscritti (cinque fiorentini e uno napoletano) e delle stampe; o per l'acribia usata nel corredare il testo di due fasce di apparato, la prima con le varianti dei codici noti, la seconda con le varianti della vulgata novecentesca (è la stampa del Simioni, 1913), e di una quantità di note, ricche di erudizione e di richiami alla *Introduzione*. Qui la studiosa riflette sull'intrigante compresenza di due impianti nell'operetta: uno descrittivo, la veduta della natura sconvolta dalle intemperie invernali, l'altro narrativo, il mito della ninfa Ambra divenuta la rocciafondamento della villa medicea di Poggio a Caiano. Conducendo una serrata analisi stilistica, e individuando una serie di luoghi critici, la Bessi raggiunge i confini dell'attuale possibile conoscenza in merito al poemetto. Sfugge se le due parti siano nate ad un tempo, o in momenti diversi, con la secondogenita a giustapporsi alla primogenita senza penetrarla in modo effettivamente riuscito; ma è chiaro che nelle 48 ottave dell'opera si coglie, limpida, la personalità di Lorenzo scrittore; vocato alla discontinuità, mitografo, e cultore amoroso dei classici.

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