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## Remembering Franco Fido (1931-2020)

**Ombretta Frau & Cristina Gragnani**

Fall River, Massachusetts, Summer 2000. Two graduate students get off the bus and look for a taxi to take them to Little Compton, Rhode Island. They have a meeting with their professor, Franco Fido, to discuss their Pirandello book in progress. They are late. All they can do is call him from a pay phone. The professor's voice echoes in the phone booth: "You will never find a taxi there! I'll come and get you!" They protest, but in vain. Within half an hour they are in his car. Fifteen minutes later, they sit in his garden with a slice of Madame Josie's delicious peach pie.

In the classroom, Franco Fido was outspoken and demanding. When he did not like the style of a paragraph he would not hesitate to gloss it with a piercing "*brutto!*" At the same time, however, he was a generous and enthusiastic mentor. The summer meeting in Little Compton was his idea. During the semester, his office door on Boylston Hall's third floor was always open. A light knock was enough to induce a break from whatever book he was reading (he was always reading something) and an invitation to take a seat. He was happy to talk about literature and made no distinction between famous scholars and graduate students. A prodigious reader with an impressive knowledge of Italian and eighteenth-century European literature, Fido brought an inexhaustible energy to the classroom. He could speak for the duration of the seminar, but he did not mind being interrupted. On the contrary, he always listened carefully, and was happiest if a lively discussion arose from a simple observation. We knew that he would always speak his mind, and just as he was not reticent if he had to criticize a student, he did not spare compliments when he was struck by a good remark. Then, he would stop to think, and would promise to reread that short story, or poem, or play, and think about it some more. Sometimes, he would surprise us, perhaps a week later, including our observations into the day's lecture. In his seminars, he was extroverted, methodical, honest, and sharp. Generations of students learned to appreciate the *Decameron's* "imperfect symmetries" from him, and to analyze the *Promessi sposi's* characters using his famous model. Theater was in his blood. His paternal uncle, Venetian actor Cesco Baseggio, inspired his passion for his greatest area of expertise, Carlo Goldoni and Venetian theater, which he loved to quote from memory.

Our acquaintance with Franco Fido did not end in the classroom. Whenever he could, he liked to join us for a drink after one of the weekly talks at the Barker Center for the Humanities. They were innocent little escapades he enjoyed when his wife Josie was away. He would tell us about his childhood in Venice during fascism and, later, about his adolescence in the *laguna*, always out on a boat with his brother Carlo, sometimes getting hit in the head by food scraps thrown into the canals. He loved to tell an amusing story about his mentor, the great Luigi Russo, who, an atheist afraid that, on his deathbed, he would feel the need to call a priest, made his students promise to stop him. He often spoke of his wife Josie, whose skills as a gardener he greatly admired. But, above all, he praised her ability as a reader, "much better than me." He also told us how, as an acting instructor at Berkeley at the beginning of his career, he used to visit antiquarian bookstores dreaming of buying books he could not afford, until one day a bookseller, probably moved by generosity or perhaps tired of him, gifted him a volume on Sacco and Vanzetti that he had been looking at for some time. His precious library in Rhode Island,

arranged along wooden and plexiglass shelves, contained small and large treasures unearthed from antiquarian dealers around the world. He was very protective of his books, and not just of the rare ones. He lent them when necessary, but with many recommendations. Sometimes, because of his sincerity, he could seem a bit grumpy. Instead, he was a loving grandfather, and a generous and hospitable man.

It is difficult to imagine Franco Fido in his French home in Longué-Jumelles, where he spent the last years of his life, deprived of his sight and, as a consequence, of the pleasure of reading. Rather, we want to remember him sitting at his desk at Harvard, with a pen suspended over one of our papers.

Franco Fido (15 July, 1931-23 June, 2020) was the Carl A. Pescosolido Professor of Romance Languages, Emeritus at Harvard University. He started his American teaching career at UC Berkeley in the late 1950s. Between 1963 and 1969 he taught at UCLA. In 1969, he moved to Brown University, where he taught until 1990, the year of his Harvard appointment. Fido was a prolific scholar, his books include monographs on Boccaccio, Machiavelli, Goldoni, and many others.

Ombretta Frau (Mount Holyoke College) and Cristina Gagnani (Temple University) completed their PhD at Harvard in 2002.