The legend of Luigi Di Ruscio

In post-war Italy, Luigi Di Ruscio, a self-taught writer, was an unemployed bricklayer and a grassroots activist in the PCI. Luigi Di Ruscio emigrated to Norway in 1957 and found a job in a nail factory. “I wanted to write what people don’t usually write; the destitution of working-class streets, the wretchedness of poor people”, he would confide later on. A year after his death, the writer Angelo Ferracuti made the journey northwards, on the trail of the metalworker poet.

Angelo Ferracuti
Journalist and writer

Drawing on a daily existence where no one speaks his language, either in the factory or at home, the worker-writer Di Ruscio freely interweaves novel, autobiography and poetry in his book.

Image © Angelo Ferracuti
(p. 43-46)
I was still a little boy when I began hearing about Luigi Di Ruscio. I was flipping through an album of black and white photos, a reminder of the short Norwegian lives of my uncle and aunt, who had emigrated to Norway in the fifties. I remember his appearance: a very thin, serious-looking man, with a full head of very dark hair – I think the photo was taken at Vigeland Park in Oslo – and they said he was a writer. That is how his legend entered my life for the first time.

He was born in Fermo in 1930 in an underclass family and dropped out of school at an early age to go and do various jobs, working as a labourer, a house painter and a wedding photographer. At the age of forty, he was already a grassroots militant in the PCI (Italian Communist Party) of Palmiro Togliatti and was writing verses.

“I picture an unruly and insolent schoolboy, up to his eyebrows in ink smears, with the teacher hitting him over the head with a copy of the Corriere della sera; all this right in the middle of the Fascist era. That is the snapshot by the literary critic Massimo Raffaei, taking a few excerpts from the coming-of-age story Apprendistato.

Di Ruscio wrote: “We used to live in an unhotted home in an alley. There was soup for midday meal and boiled potatoes or salad in the evening. My first collection of writings has merely something to do with my everyday experiences, with what I was, with what we were, with what we spoke.”

His debut collection, Non possiamo abituarci a morire (We cannot get used to dying), was printed by Schwarz in 1953.

Franco Fortini hits the nail on the head with the language we spoke”.

There, Luigi, divested of his dark work overalls, came out of the shower, stopped being a worker and clocked on as a writer, holed up in his room and writing late into the night.

1. The paragraphs marked with an * have been translated freely.
2. Italian writer, poet and literary critic (1917-1994). Also known as Franco Lattes.

Personnel number 27, workshop B12
This is what Luigi Di Ruscio wrote in the first period of his Norwegian memoirs: “I arrived in Oslo with fifty Norwegian kroner, barely ten thousand lira. I slept in a Salvation Army shelter, I found a job as a dishwasher, and a few months later I found a job in a factory, we were happy, we had a bedroom measuring nine square metres, a bed, a table with a chair, a sink and an electric hot plate”. He lived in that city for 54 years, got married, had children, wrote collections of poetry and novels and thousands of letters. Appreciated by Italo Calvino, Paolo Volponi and by the Nobel Prize winner Salvatore Quasimodo, this case of never-ending literary interest fascinated many generations of writers, including mine. That is why, a year after his death, which occurred in February 2011, I wanted to return to Oslo.

Adrian, his youngest son, lived in a very ordinary and quiet suburban district, like the whole of the slightly Orwellian city. You feel, more than elsewhere, the existentialist atmosphere of Fahrenheit 451, the novel by Bradbury, but above all the atmosphere of the film that Truffaut made of it. It was not only a...
visual matter, I thought, but an auditive one. The sounds were always clear, the wide-open spaces made it easier to differentiate them, like the rattling of the rails of a train arriving at the Rodtvet underground stop, on line 5, close to a large prison.

When I arrived on the first afternoon at dusk on an autumn day, the streets were deserted, all the windows were already lit in the buildings. You could discern the silhouettes of the persons inside. Adrian’s apartment is on the first floor, and I had barely crossed the threshold and gone through the door, small but cluttered with shoes on the floor, when the first thing I noticed was the tiny, stylised portrait of Luigi made by the painter Ernesto Treccani, with a few horizontal, vertical or oblique lines like the coloured sticks of a Mikado.

In the living room, on the shelf, (and certainly not by chance), alongside Brecht, a monumental *Ulysses* by James Joyce; all Luigi’s books that he had given with a dedication to his son and signed Pappa, which means Dad in Norwegian. A little higher up on the shelf, there were a few objects from the Fordist factory where he worked for forty years: the personnel number, 27, the badge of workshop B12, the grey goggles with the dark lenses to protect the eyes, like those that welders put on every morning at the Christiania Spigerverk factory.

We had fantasised a great deal about that factory. For those of us who had read Di Ruscio, it was not only the mechanical engineering factory that produced top-quality nails, known throughout Europe; the Spigerverk was the total factory, the factory of literature, the workshop of a circle of hell, Chaplin’s factory in *Modern Times* and, above all, the factory where Luigi thought literature which he would write down once he had returned home on his bike in another suburbs of Oslo, at number 4c Aasengata street, in that apartment where he lived with Mary Sandberg, the singing wife and muse of *Mythologies*.

It was also the place where he raised four children and wrote like a madman all his life, in a little room, as narrow as a prison cell, with only the most basic furniture. Bent over his writing desk, he would punch the keys of his mechanical Olivetti and, from his window, view the suburbs made of identical buildings, carefully tended gardens and icy, half-empty streets. There, Luigi, divested of his dark work overall, came out of the shower, stopped being a worker and clocked on as a writer, holed up in his room and writing late into the night.

In his memoirs, *La neve nera di Oslo* (The Black Snow of Oslo), last volume of a narrative trilogy that begins with the very Italian *Palmiro*, Luigi wrote: “Once my shift was ended, I plunged once more into writing, heedless of all the events that came my way. I bravely put up with all the mockery aimed at the Italian poet who works in an Oslo factory. There have never been metalworker poets in Norway but, when it comes to Italians, anything is possible.”

In a letter dated 6th November 1967, he told my Uncle Cesare: “I am still working where you used to work, not on machine number nine, the machine for the square iron bars, but on number ten, the one that makes the steel wire. It is restful work; I have been doing the same job for ten years and it has become automatic; I could go on doing the same job even if I became blind”. Talking about his daily work, he would say in a few verses that his machine would become the eternity of cosmic alienation: “We start our day at six / we are the start of every day / time starts to spin on the drawing machine / it is waiting for me open-mouthed / my dance, my show begins”.

The ironworker

Adrian was the only child with whom he talked about music, the visual arts, literature and, above all, politics. Adrian said to me that his father considered himself as a product of history. “My poetry is not a privileged moment; my entire writing is a privileged
moment. It is also a privilege in an historical sense: without a five-day week, without the hourly wage that allows me to buy books, I would not have been able to write. It is as if I said that, without the all-out strikes that the Norwegian working class staged during the thirties, I would not have been entitled to such a privilege. Without the gains made by the western working class, I would not have been able to write. If I had remained in Italy, I would only have been able to write in prison; when I was working in Italy, I could not write since the working week was too long and exhausting. I would go back home just to sleep**, he explained in an interview with Giancarlo Majorino**, a discussion that closes *Istruzioni per l’uso della repressione*, published by Savelli in 1980.

In Oslo, I also went to visit the cemetery where Luigi was buried. His grave is a small marble slab with the inscription "Italian poet" under the given name and surname*. I then met his wife Mary, his children, his lifetime friend, Domenico Trivilino, and the elderly pensioners from the Italian social club. Daniello Rini, of course, but also the cobbler Grosso, and Giuseppe Valvo, the Sicilian who had been his editor for so many years. I am referring to the person who read the rough draft of his books and gave him advice which Luigi accepted in the first instance and then rejected and then took into consideration once again, after which they embarked on emphatic discussions that called their old friendship into question every time. The friends from the Italian social club were the ones to nickname Luigi *"lu fierru",* with reference to his job as an ironworker.

But before leaving, I thought it would be a good idea to go and visit the factory, Christiania Spigerverk, or at least what remained of it after its recent dismantling. That is how, one morning, accompanied by Adrian, we made our way on foot along the route that Luigi followed every day on his bicycle to reach the factory. Emerging from a tree-lined path, we found ourselves on the main street, a long, desolate, straight avenue bordered with old and new buildings, ghostly industrial plants with reddish walls, and with the rails of the blue tram laid on a strip of grass running through the middle and the occasional car to break the silence of the street. We saw a postman dragging his red metal trolley and walking quickly through the Treschows gate and came upon other, recently built buildings blending into the greyness of the sky and the asphalt of the street.

After that block of buildings, we entered the woods by following a path through the dense trees with their dead and yellowing leaves. The Akerselva river flowed alongside. Luigi Di Ruscio rode through here every morning on his bicycle, pedalling through the darkness, wrapped tight in his jacket. And he always returned home in the night through that dense woods and sometimes through the falling snow: "Count all the times that I left the factory in the middle of the night, coming away from the workshop at night-time after having breathed for hours on end the infernal stench of the tanks full of sulphuric acid; I breathe in hell and yet I return home walking in the fresh, soft and immaculate snow; leaving only my footprints in the whiteness, I turn around to look at them".

Skirting the river, we reached a small wooden bridge, beyond which we began to see the houses of another district, painted yellow, and then, continuing our walk, we came across even more recent houses, full of glass windows, and, in the middle of them, the old building of a red-bricked, industrial plant; two distant worlds living together. We finally arrived at the large open space where the ruins of the factory stand. Only rubble and barriers remain. A worker explained to us that the machines had already been taken away and only piles of old pipes lay abandoned in the surviving workshops. Adrian frantically continued to take photos. It was the first time he had entered the workshop where his father used to work. A blast furnace used to operate at the bottom of the hall where we were standing.

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4. The last sentence is a free translation. Translator’s note.
5. Italian poet and teacher, born in Milan in 1928.
"Without a five-day week, without the hourly wage that allows me to buy books, I would not have been able to write."

In *La neve nera di Oslo* (The Black Snow of Oslo), this place is described in a very comical way: "Here is the factory, the workshop that demands frantic mobility until I collapse with exhaustion. I have to operate three drawing machines, running from one spot to another among the entangled wires. I am the worker most surrounded by tin cans in the entire history of the industrial revolution. In the age of automation, I am the worker operating three prehistoric wire drawing machines leaking oil and water from all sides, and I put peeled tomato tins emptied at home wherever I can so as not to flood the floor".

**"Damned for a world of damned"**

Just at the back, in the same building, where the original plant once stood, a twin factory was now located and produced shovels for shovelling snow, called Elkem. When we arrived, an extremely thin and very smiling secretary arranged for us to talk to a gentleman from hell! "I understood; he had come to buy fruit and vegetables in shops kept by immigrants, often Turks. One of them always asked Luigi: "Which country do you come from"?, but he did not like nosy parkers. In fact, he would often say to his son: "Stupid people always ask for information, but never give any". Luigi was a contrarious man and would therefore answer with a cheeky counter-question: "Why do you ask?". More often than not, he preferred to remain silent. Adrian laughed while continuing to tell the story. He went on to tell me that one day, his father was in a bad mood, either because the shopkeeper had increased his prices, or because the fruit was not of such good quality as usual. When the shop owner asked him for the umpteenth time "where do you come from?", Luigi had lost his temper and answered him while raising his voice, "You want to know where I come from? I come from hell!".

Adrian would never forget that moment: "I understood; he had come to buy fruit and not to answer questions about his nationality. Perhaps everything has to do with the racism that the Italians had to endure in the sixties. I remember him telling me: Your mother was brave to marry me."

In a famous poem, Luigi Di Ruscio had depicted in verse his condition as an ex-patriate and how he liked to define himself: "everywhere the last for that horrible race of those who come first/last in his land with a thousand lire a day/last in this new land because of his Italian voice/last to hate and that man’s hatred marks everything/unnailed and crucified at every moment/damned for a world of damned".

and taking off our everyday overalls, we saw each other’s tiredness, and then we began to die or to disappear, a few pensioners would come back to see us, we saw them emerging among the machines, paler, more awkward, they now seemed to be the ghosts of what they were, I have them all in front of me now, they are passing before my eyes just as I saw them for the last time, there had been one who was a Communist, at the most, someone was from the social-democratic left."