

INTRODUCTION

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Romano Bilenchi's *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* is one of a handful of novels from the Fascist period in Italy still of interest today for reasons that go beyond the historical. Like Alberto Moravia's 1929 *Gli indifferenti* (*The Indifferent Ones*, 1932) and Elio Vittorini's 1941 *Conversazione in Sicilia* (*Conversations in Sicily*, 2000), Bilenchi's novel deals with issues of self-discovery and the struggle to attain emotional and ethical maturity that, while exacerbated by the oppressive atmosphere of Mussolini's totalitarian regime, are recognizable today as inevitable stages in human development. Although poetry, especially that which concentrated on the inner life of the poet, was able to survive and even flourish during Fascism, times were much harder for the novel with its inevitable concern for social issues. For this reason, novels of lasting artistic value written during Fascism's twenty-years in Italy can be counted on the fingers of one or perhaps two hands. Bilenchi's masterpiece is unarguably among them. The portrait it provides of its protagonist Sergio's late childhood and early adolescence and its unique portrayals of the beautiful, idiosyncratic, unpredictable, and tender women who enthrall him – principal among these Sergio's aunt and his mother – make Bilenchi's work both unique and universal. Its enduring value lies not only in what his novel has to say about nascent Fascism in the Tuscan provinces around the time of the First World War. It is equally important for its beguiling portrait of a pre-adolescent young man and its portrayals of three remarkable women, each of whom manages to combine images of the irresistible and entrancing *femme fatale* with those of the supportive and loving mother.

The Author

Romano Bilenchi was born in 1909 in Colle Val d'Elsa, a small town near both Siena and Florence. In addition to being an agricultural center, Colle is also known for its light industry, much of which in earlier years was powered by the Elsa River in whose valley the lower part of the city lies. Bilenchi's father, Tarquinio, owned a mill for pressing olive pits and other agricultural products, an establishment that had been in operation since the early eighteenth century and employed around eighty workers

when Romano was growing up. Despite his social position as a mill owner, Tarquinio, who died in 1915 when Romano was six years old, was a Socialist. Thus he resembles Bruno, Sergio's father in this novel, who is also a Socialist and is viewed for this reason with suspicion by his economic peers.

Bilenchi began his formal education in Colle, where he was attracted to literature at an early age. In addition to reading contemporary Italian and French authors, he also studied the writings of the fourteenth-century Tuscan mystics, including those of Saint Catherine of Siena. He then went to Florence to attend a Liceo Scientifico, or a high school specializing in the sciences. After two years, however, he contracted tuberculosis of the spine, also known as Pott's Disease. He was sent for treatment to Cortina, a town in the Alps, where he remained confined to bed for the next three years.

Though he later suffered from diabetes and other illnesses, Bilenchi had a long and active life. A voracious reader from childhood, as a young man he attended lectures at the University of Bologna but never obtained a university degree. However, he was close friends with many of Italy's leading intellectuals, whom he encountered regularly at cafés in Florence, where he was pursuing a career as a journalist as well as writing fiction. These included the poet Mario Luzi and the novelist Elio Vittorini, both of whom became life-long friends; the poet Eugenio Montale, who was to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1975; the poet and literary critic Carlo Bo, another life-long friend to whom the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* is dedicated; and many of the other writers, painters, and social and literary critics who during this period were making Florence the intellectual capital of the country.

Although Bilenchi's writing might seem very personal, even introverted, he also possessed what has been called a "poetic-historical" imagination of an especially robust sort. This meant that he was frequently and passionately involved throughout his life in the more important cultural and political controversies of the day. In the 1930s, when Bilenchi was debating issues involving literature, culture, and the future of Italy at cafés like the Pazskowski and the Giubbe Rosse, intellectual life in Italy was very much under the thumb of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime. The Fascist domination of the country that began in 1922 when the party seized power would continue through the Allied invasion in 1943, the subsequent German occupation of the country, and a civil war between those supporting and those opposing Mussolini and his Nazi allies. It would end only with the conclusion of the war in 1945 and the establishment of the Italian Republic.

During much of the Fascist period, Bilenchi continued to live and work in Florence, a city where hostilities between opposing forces were at their most savage. There he took an active part in the anti-Fascist Resistance, risking his life as a partisan. Just a few years earlier, however, he had been an enthusiastic supporter of Fascism, which he erroneously saw as a revolutionary movement intent on restoring dignity to Italy's reputation in the

world and putting an end to social injustice. But the involution of national politics as the regime became more and more authoritarian, the events in Spain during that country's Civil War in 1936-1939, anti-Semitic legislation in Italy (which Bilenchi at the time decried as a "return to the stone age"), and Bilenchi's own awakening to the real nature of the Fascist regime all led him to break definitively with the Party. In fact, in the years that followed, he became a member of the Italian Communist Party, which he continued to support – though not uninterruptedly and always critically – for the rest of his life.

Bilenchi's earliest journalistic work was on behalf of radical Fascist publications in essays and editorials. The political and cultural positions he put forward in these writings were not always well received by party authorities. During this same period, he was one of the founders of *Strapaese*, an intensely patriotic, anti-cosmopolitan, and anti-European literary and intellectual movement that insisted that Italy's most authentic cultural values were to be found in the uncomplicated lives and traditions of ordinary inhabitants of the country's small towns, especially in Tuscany. Throughout his militancy as both Fascist and then Communist, Bilenchi was careful to disassociate himself from any sort of party line. Because of his fierce independence, his friend Luzi has said that, while Bilenchi was indeed an active Fascist, he should be considered an "apostate" within the movement.

After the war, Bilenchi worked for a number of important newspapers and journals on the political left in ventures that in some cases were financially supported by the Italian Communist Party. But here too he was a public gadfly whose positions were not always welcomed by the authorities monitoring his journalistic writings. An active Communist during the Resistance and Party supporter afterwards, Bilenchi broke with the Italian Communist Party in 1956 after the Soviet invasion of Poland, only to re-join in 1972, when he again pocketed the membership card that had been kept for him by a Florentine comrade during the interim.

Bilenchi's Fiction

Bilenchi's career as a writer of fiction will be divided in this introductory essay into three periods. The first includes his early works, among them the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa*.

This first period in Bilenchi's literary production began with *Maria*, a remarkably skillful short story composed when its author was only sixteen years old. This period includes mostly shorter fiction that, like *Maria*, is set among ordinary people in provincial Tuscany. One of Bilenchi's most important works in this group is *Anna e Bruno*, a somewhat longer story in which he explores the theme of adolescence and the passionate love of a son for his mother. This is also a defining theme in the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa*, though its protagonist is enthralled not only by

his mother, Marta, but also by his aunt, Vera, and his tutor, Clara, all of them a generation older than the pre-adolescent Sergio. Though the two works were published at about the same time, Luzi has helpfully described *Anna e Bruno* as an “entrance door” to the rest of Bilenchi’s work for its focus on the theme of adolescence that will be so important for the rest of this writer’s fiction.

Beginning during the war years and on into the immediate postwar period, Bilenchi continued to bring out new creative works. However, in 1958 he stopped publishing fiction altogether and turned all of his attention to journalism and cultural and political militancy. During this second, silent, period of his career, so far as the publication of fiction was concerned, he corrected and rewrote much of his earlier work, including the novel presented here.

In 1972, Bilenchi returned rather dramatically to imaginative fiction with the novel, *Il bottone di Stalingrado* (“The Coat Button from Stalingrad”), a new work set in the years of the Second World War and its aftermath. This novel marks the beginning of the third and final period of his creative life. At the time of *Il bottone di Stalingrado*’s first publication, this loosely autobiographical novel was found politically and artistically controversial by some sectors of the Italian intellectual establishment, though not by Bilenchi’s comrades and others on the Left. In succeeding years, Bilenchi went on to bring out rewritten versions of virtually all of his earlier works.

In the new intellectual climate of post-war Italy, when attention was being paid to such writers as Franz Kafka and Bilenchi’s fellow Tuscan Federico Tozzi, who had been forbidden or ignored during Fascism, Bilenchi’s earlier works began to be seen as more universal in scope than in the days of *Strapaese* and Fascist censorship. In 1984, he added the newly written *Il gelo* (*The Chill*, 2009) to *La siccità* (“The Drought”) of 1940, and *La miseria* (“Poverty”) of 1941 to make up *Gli anni impossibili* (“The Impossible Years”), a three-part opus generally considered one of his major accomplishments in fiction. During this same period, he also gathered personal recollections of individuals he had known throughout his life into a volume of essays entitled *Amici* (“Friends”) which he published in 1988. Because of its descriptions of leading intellectuals of the period, this volume can be considered an important contribution to the intellectual history of Italy during the period of Bilenchi’s life. Two of the essays in this work are those devoted to his friend Vittorini and to the American poet Ezra Pound, whom Bilenchi had visited and interviewed in Rapallo, where Pound was in exile. Bilenchi’s *Opere* or “Works” were published in 2007, his *Opere complete* (“Complete Works”) in 2009.

Romano Bilenchi was eighty years old when he died at his house on Via Brunetto Latini, a street named for another author and political thinker – this one, a thirteenth-century writer much admired and respected by Dante, who describes his importance for his own intellectual development in a moving passage in his *Inferno*.

The Novel

The *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* was written between 1936 and 1938 at a time when Fascism was firmly in power in Italy and civil war was raging in Spain. It was published for the first time in 1940 in an edition with numerous typographical errors and from which certain passages deemed offensive had been removed by Fascist authorities. A second edition appeared in 1973, that is, more than thirty years later, at the beginning of Bilenchi's third period as described above. In this second edition, the printing errors were corrected, omitted passages restored, and certain additional, mostly non-structural changes made. In later years, Bilenchi turned his attention to the work once again, this time completely rewriting its first six chapters, only to decide that what he had created was the beginning of an entirely new novel. Though he abandoned this revised material, it has been included as an appendix in subsequent editions of the work, including the definitive third edition of 1985, which is the basis for this English translation.

The *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* is Bilenchi's longest and most sustained and coherent work. It tells a single story in thirty-four temporally consecutive and interlocking chapters rather than being divided into autonomous or semi-autonomous sections, as is the case for *Gli anni impossibili*, *Amici*, and, arguably, for *Il bottone di Stalingrado* as well. Bilenchi has said that of all his writings, the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* is the work to which he felt most closely attached, declaring in a 1972 interview that he considered it the best of all his writings – though this was before *Il bottone di Stalingrado*, *Gli anni impossibili*, and *Amici* had appeared.

At some point after the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa's* first publication, and with the war and occupation still ravaging central Italy, Bilenchi drafted what he planned as a kind of sequel to the 1940 novel. Though little is known about this unfinished work, it seems to have described a passionate but once again somewhat out-of-phase love between relatives, in this case cousins rather than nephew and aunt as in its predecessor. The principal character in this unfinished work is a young man a few years older than the Sergio of the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa*; the cousin he is in love with is about his same age, though more experienced and emotionally mature. The new work, then, would have been a repetition and variation of the story of Sergio and Vera. The only copy of this text, however, which in manuscript was more than five hundred pages long, was lost when the house in Colle where it had been stored was sacked by marauding Allied forces. As far as is known, Bilenchi never took up the unfinished work again, though he did make reference to it in interviews.

The novel that is presented in translation here was composed during a period in Bilenchi's life when he was moving politically from a position of left-wing, non-conformist Fascism toward Marxism and Communist militancy but had not, it seems, made the change entirely. In the context of his literary art, it represents a turning away from *Strapaese's* sometimes

strident insistence on the robust healthiness of the subaltern classes to a more psychologically nuanced view of human existence.

Because of its setting in a vividly described rural Tuscany and its characters' roots in ordinary provincial life, the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* can be considered part of a tradition of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction set in working- and middle-class Tuscany, especially its small towns and countryside. This tradition stretches from Federigo Tozzi (1883-1920), a Sienese writer who was an acknowledged influence on Bilenchi's art, to Carlo Cassola (1917-1987), whose *La ragazza di Bube* of 1960 (*Bebo's Girl*, 1962) is partly set in Bilenchi's native Colle, to Antonio Tabucchi (1943-2012), whose *Piazza d'Italia* ("Italy Square") of 1975 treats the political and sentimental vicissitudes of characters in a very small town in Tuscany before, during, and after Fascism. In works by these and other writers from Bilenchi's native region, provincial Tuscany is frequently characterized as a space of enclosure and frustration, the theater for interpersonal cruelty both personal and collective, as well as for demonstrations of loyalty and affection, all in the context of a deep and abiding love for the towns and countryside and for the people of the region.

The action of the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* is set some twenty years earlier than the time of its composition and first publication. The war that Sergio's father insists he will not fight in – and then does – is not the war in Spain of the late 1930s, but the First World War of 1914-1918. Italy joined this conflict on the Allied side only in 1915, after the hostilities had been underway for about a year. Before that time, public opinion in the country was divided between the interventionists, on the one hand, including many who would later join the Fascist movement, and the anti-interventionists on the other. The latter included many Socialists like Sergio's father in the novel, as well as others on the Italian Left. These were individuals who, in these years just before the Russian Revolution, and whether or not they were members of the Socialist International, felt that a war pitting workers from one country against workers from another could only be harmful to the interests of working people everywhere. It is during a protest against a rally in favor of Italian intervention into the war that Bruno is beaten up by right-wing elements in events described in Chapter Six of the novel. In this episode, Bruno seems not to have acted in tandem with an organized Socialist group but to have responded spontaneously with others sympathetic to his anti-interventionist position – "peasants and workers" is how he describes them in the violent political argument he has with his mother in Chapter Seven. In the same way, the interventionist forces that were opposing these dissenters were not yet part of the Fascist movement that began to coalesce in Italy only after the war in 1919 and then came to power with the March on Rome of October 28, 1922.

For its part, the Italian Communist Party, later so important for Bilenchi, was not founded until 1921. Though they both grew out of the unrest in Italy before and after the First World War, neither the Fascist nor the Communist parties came together officially as political parties in Italy

until after the action recounted in the *Conservatorio di Santa Teresa* was over. Nonetheless, it is the struggle between what might be called proto-Fascist and proto-Communist forces that forms the political and historical background for much of the novel's action.

This nascent hostility between opposing political forces is also the basis for the barely repressed enmity that a number of its characters harbor for one another. These include the truculent shepherd Giulio, whose sympathies before his induction into the military are with the anti-interventionists, and the aggressively opportunistic, interventionist Carlo, who did fight in the war before being killed by the police in circumstances that were likely more criminal than political. The contest between Right and Left provides context as well for the novel's dramatic conclusion. In this episode in Chapter Thirty-three, Edoardo, Vera's fiancé and a positive figure in the text's economy, is killed by a man connected to a group of workers whose provocative singing Edoardo has objected to for both political reasons and considerations of decorum. His death, therefore, is a political event as well as a personal tragedy for Vera, Sergio, and Edoardo's own family.

While the most important group of characters in the novel is the family cluster made up of Sergio, his father Bruno, his mother Marta, his aunt Vera, and his grandmother Giovanna, Edoardo and his family, especially his younger sister Laura, are another social formation important in the novel, even though they do not appear until its final chapters. This is because in the work's closing pages Vera seems poised to leave the villa, where she has lived with Sergio and the others, for life elsewhere with Edoardo. Other characters associated with life at the villa include Clara, the beautiful tutor hired to help Sergio pass his entrance exams to Santa Teresa's, the shepherd Giulio, and the one-time dependent and then adventurer Carlo, both of whom figure as Sergio's antagonists in his attempts to win and retain all of Vera and Marta's affections. The other students Sergio meets at Santa Teresa's are of somewhat lesser importance in the work, except perhaps for the studious and ostentatiously chaste Nide, for whom Sergio feels a different sort of attraction from the all-consuming one he continues to nurture – even after he has met Nide – for his mother, his aunt, and his tutor.

All of the novel's action, including the two episodes at the seaside, takes place in rural and provincial Tuscany. But Bilenchi does not identify any of the cities involved by name. They are indicated, instead, by an initial: "P" for Colle and "M" for Volterra, for example. Referring to these cities by initials (which, obviously, are not the first letters of their names) has made it possible, Bilenchi has explained, for him to create geographical locations that were "existential rather than geographical:" that is, derived in part from his imagination rather than being tied to a specific physical reality. As to the Conservatory of Santa Teresa itself, it was based on the still-existent Conservatory of San Pietro, an institution in Colle's upper city that was founded at the beginning of the seventeenth century as a

convent. This institution subsequently became a secular women's college, boarding school, elementary school, and Teachers' College; its architectural configuration of classrooms and corridors is similar to that described in the novel.

Space of a physical and imaginative sort is crucial in this novel, and consideration of how Bilenchi uses space can lead to a deeper understanding of the work's structure, themes, and meaning. Throughout the novel, the natural space of the countryside, the hills, the chalk crests, and the river, together with the fields, trees, and gardens planted and cultivated by human forces are in opposition to the cultural, entirely humanly created spaces of P with its streets, squares, walls, and buildings. Such spaces include not only the Conservatory of Santa Teresa but also the city's dwellings, including the house where Sergio's maternal grandparents live, its shops and cafés, and the factories that provide the city's economic base.

Sergio's first contact, however, with a space that is different from the reassuring, humanly constructed one of the family villa is not with the city that he will have to cope with later but with the countryside just beyond his home and adjoining garden. In the novel's initial chapter, we are told "Sergio's first encounter with the outdoors (*la natura* in Bilenchi's original) took place on a walk through the hills," which soon "began to reveal their secret world of flowers and the earth with its swarms of tiny insects," much to the little boy's delight. Nature or the countryside, however, for all its hidden marvels including its soil and insects, is not always a magical source of wonder but can be a cause for alarm as well. The strong winds that blow down from the hills are sometimes so powerful they force the inhabitants of the plains to take cover "behind stacks of firewood or haymows or at the foot of the walls that surrounded the threshing floors." The winter, while beautiful and enticing for Vera and Clara in the episode in Chapter Fourteen when Clara provokes Sergio's jealousy by accepting an invitation to sleep overnight with his beloved aunt, can be deadly cold and is a recurring source of depression and unhappiness for the villa's inhabitants.

The most suggestive and important element in the natural space that Sergio explores in the novel is the river. While it, too, like Bilenchi's cities, is more an "existential" than an geographically correct reality, the novel's river is based on the Elsa that has been so important for the economic life of the region since paleo-industrial times and for whose generators Vera says she feels more affection than she does for the natural beauties of the river itself. In Bilenchi's account, the river is a powerful and mysteriously ambiguous force, especially for the sensitive Sergio. In Chapter Five, when Vera escorts Marta and Sergio to see the waterfalls and lake that the river has formed, she tells them she is going to show them something "beautiful." And Marta does find the scene before them "gorgeous but frightening." Sergio, for his part, is terrified of the river and clings to Marta for fear he will be sucked down into its threatening depths. Back at the villa that night, he dreams his father – another powerful and ambigu-

ous force in the little boy's life – is pushing him down with nightmarish insistence into the water he has just seen, doing so “slowly, insidiously, and without using any force.”

Another distressing episode set in the river valley is described in Chapter Three, when Marta and Sergio, on a moonlit walk while the rest of the family is tending to a dying woman in the city, encounter huge numbers of frogs in the swamps that border the river. Marta, who is perhaps upset about the visit the others are making in the city, finds the sounds produced by the frogs similar to “people sobbing,” and both she and Sergio are distressed by their croaking. In a 1989 interview, Bilenchi stated that he has always found the croaking of frogs like the laments of “poor souls whose throats have been cut,” a sonic icon of desperation for those like him who were born in the country and grew up hearing that lament.

The natural spaces that figure in this novel, then, can be a source of both wonder and dismay, and what is gorgeous can quickly become frightening, not only for the impressionable Sergio but for his mother as well. One of the challenges that Sergio must face is to learn how to move through the natural spaces that he encounters near at home and finds so mysterious, fascinating, and sometimes frightening, into the even more complex, humanly constructed and maintained cultural spaces of the city where his education is going to continue.

The cultural space that Sergio enters when he begins to attend the Conservatory is made up of streets, dwellings, squares, shops, cafés, and avenues, but also smokestacks, factories, and factory workers, including the working class boys the same age as Sergio who shout derisively at them when he and his family pass by in their carriage. The station where Bruno will take the train that will carry him away to military service, war, and eventual imprisonment is located at the center of P, just a few steps from its principal square. This is the station from which Clara will make her supposed getaway to the city of F in her aborted attempt to marry the lover Giulio gleefully describes as “a fellow a few years younger than she,” and who leaves Clara alone and abandoned at that distant location. When Vera and Sergio go on vacation to the sea, they take the train as well, but from M and not from the station at P, which thus remains associated with Bruno's unhappy and Clara's desperate departures. Both P and M are fitted out with prisons, as is the seaside resort where Vera meets and flirts with a Hungarian prisoner of war. Thus, the city is not only a space of institutions like the Conservatory, of cafés and shops, and even a museum (at M), but also a point of departure to places of pain and suffering, a home for factories, and the site of prisons, four of which, if the location in Austria where Bruno is held is included, are part of the background to the novel.

When a natural space, such as that of the river, collides with the constructed space of the industrialized city, the results can be deeply disturbing. While walking by the river on the outskirts of the city in Chapter Nine, Vera, Marta, and Sergio come upon a group of ragged workers at huge basins processing what seems to be paper or hemp. The plant where

they are working is located along the banks of the river but is part of a city space quite distant from the lake and waterfall that have so fascinated Sergio and the women. The aesthetic and ecological degradation that occurs when the river and the city collide is described in terms of violence to a human, perhaps female, body. What Sergio, Marta, and Vera witness in the course of their walk is

[...] little bridges pressing down onto the body of the river; canals streaming from its flanks and humiliating it; boats piling on and making it still more ugly; men probing its insides as they collected sand.

Now absorbed within the city, the river is no longer a gorgeous if frightening force of nature but a living body that is being violated by humanly constructed forces indifferent to its beauty and majesty.

The spaces described in this novel can be read as masculine or feminine as well as natural or cultural. The villa in the country where Sergio lives with his family is a feminine space dominated even before Bruno leaves for war by Marta, Vera, and Sergio's grandmother who, as co-owner of the family farms as well as of the villa and its garden, is a dominant economic force as well. Both Bruno and Sergio are often ill at ease at the villa, though the building can also be a place of refuge for the little boy. This is because Sergio still belongs as much to the feminine world of his female relatives as he does to the masculine one represented by Bruno, Giulio, and Carlo, the hunters who used to come to the villa before being driven away by his grandmother, and the various agricultural workers he encounters at the villa and their other possessions. Like the villa, the Conservatory is also a feminine space. Even before he has seen the school, it has been configured in his imagination as a place specific to Marta and Vera, and later, he learns, to Clara as well, and, as such, mysteriously eroticized. Sergio later discovers that the Conservatory contains hidden and forbidden areas, including an abandoned chapel that older students use for trysts. When he first enters this sexually overdetermined and at first entirely feminized location, both the school principal and the first teacher he encounters are women. So is the entrance exam proctor who is so beguiling that Sergio can scarcely keep from staring at her during the exam. The first students he meets are the female boarding students whom he finds so oddly dressed that his mother and aunt tell him, teasingly, that he will be forced to wear the same clothes they do if he wants to enter the Conservatory. These girls are in fact the only members of the scholastic community who sleep and thus truly reside at Santa Teresa's, since all the other boys and girls return to their homes once classes are over. Like the historical San Pietro, the Conservatory of Santa Teresa (which in the novel bears the name of the female Saint Teresa rather than the male Saint Peter) was founded as a convent and restricted in its early history to women students. As the novel progresses, however, Sergio comes into contact with additional teachers who are male and makes friends with students of both sexes, an indica-

tion that he has successfully inserted himself into what was previously an all-female space and taken his place as a legitimate member of its mixed gender student body.

The characters who challenge Sergio in his progress through the novel are all male. Primary among these is his father, Sergio's rival in regard to his mother and rival to his aunt as well within the family's system of power. Other males antagonistic to Sergio include Bruno's friends Giulio and Carlo, whose lascivious attention to both Marta and Vera make the two women uncomfortable and render Sergio defensive and uneasy. The shepherd and sometime fisherman Giulio with his expert knowledge of the countryside and its animals, as well as of women, and the tattooed traveler Carlo come to fill such a similar niche in the little boy's mind that their separate images become juxtaposed, and he finds he is unable to think about the two rivals separately.

Suitors for Vera's affections who must be taken more seriously than either Giulio, whose class and economic dependency on her family would make him a socially impossible mate, or the married Carlo, are Antonio and Edoardo, both of whom she meets at the sea while on vacation with Sergio. Given his exotic provenance, the Hungarian Antonio is not someone either aunt or nephew would be likely to encounter at the villa or at P, though his status as prisoner makes him oddly equivalent to the absent Bruno, who is also imprisoned in a foreign land. Vera finds Antonio "really [...] much too good looking for a man," but welcomes his attentions and is happy to flirt with him, partly because she can do so far away from the eyes of family and acquaintances. Sergio, who is powerless to stop his aunt from following her inclinations, soon finds that Antonio has also merged in his mind with remembered images of Giulio and Carlo, his other rivals for Vera's attention. But the most serious, and ultimately successful, suitor for Vera's attentions is Edoardo, a middle-class young man of anti-worker and perhaps nascent Fascist sentiments. Edoardo quickly wins Vera's affections and becomes engaged to her, only to be killed in the novel's final chapters and then memorialized by Vera and Marta at the book's conclusion. Antonio and Edoardo are alike (and in this unlike Giulio and Carlo) in their eagerness to do what they can to mitigate the jealousy and hostility Sergio feels for them. Antonio does so by giving Sergio two of the wooden snakes he has made as novelties while in prison, Edoardo by encouraging Sergio's friendship with his sister, Laura. Antonio's snakes would seem to suggest temptations put forward by the Biblical serpent, though Vera, unlike Eve, does not succumb to the temptation that the Hungarian represents. Laura's horseplay in the surf with Sergio, on the other hand, their strolls in the pine forest, dancing, and then their almost kiss constitute a more immediate and contemporary enticement. And it is not clear whether Sergio, now a protagonist in the sexual banter between him and Laura, will be able to stand up to the temptations Laura is proposing. When Edoardo is killed, in any case, *thanatos* suddenly intrudes to dislodge *eros*, and the narrative moves on to considerations of a different kind.

In the novel's early chapters, Sergio has occupied an intermediate position between feminine and masculine spaces, as is perhaps appropriate for a pre-adolescent boy. As he attempts to move away from this liminal position and proceed from childhood toward maturity, Sergio ceases to be an observer and emerges as an actor. He leaves a world that is entirely natural and enters one that is cultural as well, going from a space predominantly feminine into one where feminine and masculine coexist and interact, at the seaside resort for example which, as a humanly constructed space deliberately located in a dramatic natural setting, can be said to unite both worlds. Before this time, Sergio has been intensely curious about those spaces from which he has been excluded. This is evident in several episodes in which he chooses or is forced to peer from one space into another at distressing scenes that belong to the adult world he is struggling to understand. When Bruno is hurt at the political demonstration, Sergio manages, despite efforts by his grandmother, to peer through a doorway and see his father, first wounded and bandaged, and later writhing on the floor in what seems to be both pain and exasperation. In a subsequent episode, Sergio is outside the villa peeping through a window at Giulio who is leaning over Vera. Then, from the kitchen, Sergio sees Giulio looking down her dress and possibly kissing her in a foreshadowing of Sergio's own almost kissing Laura at the seashore. In similar fashion, from the safety of the room Sergio is sharing with Vera during their first visit to the sea, he looks out the window with horror at the army mules in a public square below who are receiving painful injections just beneath their eyes. And when Edoardo scuffles with the factory workers, Sergio and Laura watch from above through the planks of the flooring at the rotunda where they are protected from the fray. Although Sergio knows what he is watching belongs to that intriguing adult world of pain, sex, and violence from which he has so far been shielded, in all of these episodes he has seen but not entirely understood what is going on. However, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, when he sees Edoardo lying wounded and twitching on the ground, there is no doubt that the matter is far more serious than what had happened earlier to his father. "Sergio could see Edoardo's body lying next to that of the first man who had come out of the café," and he knows for sure that Edoardo has been fatally wounded. What's more, unlike the case when his father received the non-mortal wound to his head, Sergio understands why this has happened to Edoardo. Even though we learn in the next chapter that after this episode Sergio had "waited there until late at night, scarcely believing what he had seen and frightened by it at the same time," for the first time in the novel he has seen and can understand what can transpire in the adult world of class hatred and violence. Odd visions that had bedeviled him earlier in the novel now take a different form, since they are now grounded in a cruel and adult reality: "unavoidable and relentless, the image of the dark square beneath a stormy sky, the lights from the café, men running away, knives, Vera and Maria's desperate screams." These

are not random or imagined events that Sergio wonders about but essential elements in what is now his embryonic understanding of adult reality.

The novel is centered completely on Sergio. He is present on almost its every page, and there are no episodes in which he does not participate. Sergio's experiences are at once extraordinary and recognizable. Many of them involve the marvelous women he is associated with in the course of the narrative and whom he finds far more fascinating than the more humdrum girls his own age he meets at school and then at the beach. Marta and Vera, together with Clara, are unpredictable and sometimes cruel goddesses in Sergio's mind. Vivacious, fascinating, and so beautiful that he often cannot take his eyes off them – in one case to Clara's evident embarrassment and discomfort, though Vera, too, sometimes chases her staring nephew out of her bedroom – they tease him unmercifully, making him the butt of their spirited and occasionally malicious hijinks only to hug him and kiss him when he least expects (or deserves) it. In a memorable scene in Chapter Twenty-two, when they are away from home at M, Vera invites her little nephew to sleep in the same bed with her. As the scene unfolds, Sergio stares "at Vera's nude shoulders, fascinated by the rippling motions her shoulder blades made beneath her skin." Then, when she says something that he doesn't answer, "Vera slowly crane[s] her neck to look for him in the mirror," and he meets her reflected gaze without flinching in a mirror encounter of the sort that has been the site of erotic dynamics in Italian literature at least as far back as Tasso. Later, at the sea in this same chapter, Sergio realizes that, before getting into bed with her again, he has to undress facing the wall. In this instance he times himself by the rustling of her garments as she disrobes and does not turn around until she is already under the covers, a gesture of complicity he discovers "made him happy." Vera, it is clear, is part of Sergio's erotic development perhaps more than she is of his introduction into the world of education and society. To signal her withdrawal from that role, when she becomes engaged to Edoardo during their second stay at the beach, she then pushes Sergio kindly toward Laura.

At the end of the novel, Sergio is ready to continue his schooling at a new location where he is to board with "Jesuit fathers," that is, in a new and predominantly masculine space that is unlike the feminine one prevailing at the villa or at Santa Teresa's when he first entered the Conservatory. When Marta and Vera take him to the river in the novel's final episode to discuss his future, including these lodging arrangements, Sergio is the one who rolls away the boulders to clear a space for their discussion in an episode that indicates he is himself clearing the way for what will come next.

But what, indeed, will come next? What will happen to Sergio in the years that will follow? The historical moment when he will be taking his leave from Santa Teresa's was not a propitious one for young Italian males. While it is not easy to calculate this exactly, Sergio would seem to be thirteen or fourteen when the novel ends. Since we are told he was eight when his father went to war at some point after 1915, this means he was perhaps

born in 1908, or maybe, in 1909, as was Bilenchi himself. And that would mean that the final conversation in the space Sergio has cleared on bank of the river takes place somewhere around 1922, the very year of the March on Rome and the beginning of the Fascist Regime. Will Sergio grow up anti-Fascist and violent like his dagger-throwing father? Or will he perhaps take the same route that Bilenchi did, first a supporter of the Fascist Party that Edoardo, had he lived, would probably have supported, and then only later as dissenter and finally, perhaps, even a partisan, though that would be a big step for someone of Sergio's disposition and social situation? The novel provides no adequate clues for answering these questions – though it does seem intent on posing them. As the history of this period has shown, anything could happen to boys and then young men like Sergio in this time and place. But whatever happens will be forcibly determined by the climate of violence that Sergio has just begun to come to know, even if not yet to control, as the novel ends.

The Translation

We have aimed above all in our English version of this beautiful novel at readability rather than strict adherence to Bilenchi's exact words. This has sometimes meant transposing clauses, citing names instead of using pronouns, and completing the few sentence fragments that Bilenchi left in his text. It has also meant dividing some of Bilenchi's longer sentences into two as well as occasionally merging shorter sentences into longer ones. We have also altered the paragraphing and punctuation to make them conform to US standards. The spoken dialogue has been rendered into contemporary US English with as few national colloquialisms as possible.

It should be noted that one characteristic of Bilenchi's prose in this work is his unusual use of the *trapassato prossimo*, or past perfect tense. For this author, the *trapassato prossimo* is a mechanism for distancing recollections from more immediate action or description, a practice that has been discussed to good effect by Alessia Fetz in her monograph on Bilenchi's early writings cited below. We have not, however, always been able to reproduce this mechanism in our English version of the novel.

The translation is dedicated to Graham, who has taught us much about what it means to be in the world as an eight-year old boy.

Sources for the Introduction and Suggested Further Reading

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