



Heart Beats on the Left: Radical Strategies for the Novel

Third in a Series of Articles

Conversations in Sicily

by Elio Vittorini

translated by Alane Salierno Mason

introduction by Ernest Hemingway

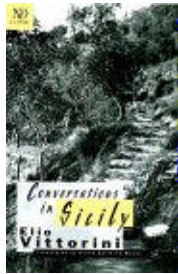
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[Eric Darton](#)

I wrote the following for an event this past March celebrating the publication of Alane Salierno Mason's translation of Elio Vittorini's Conversations in Sicily. Sponsored by New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimé and the Department of Italian Studies, the presentation featured a dialogue among Ms. Salierno Mason, Gioia Timpanelli (author of Sometimes the Soul: Two Novellas of Sicily) and myself. The panel was moderated by Ruth Ben-Ghiat, of NYU's Department of Italian Studies and author of Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945. Readings in Italian and English from Vittorini's classic text book-ended the discussion.

— E.D.



I did not come to Elio Vittorini's *Conversations in Sicily* as a result of following any predictable path. To my regret, I am not well versed in the classic works of twentieth-century Italian literature. I have made no systematic investigation of cultural responses to Fascism by writers of the generation preceding mine. To my knowledge, I possess no Sicilian bloodline, nor do I speak or read Italian. Given these factors, there would seem few chances of my finding *Conversations* or of *Conversations* finding me.

But gravity is an undeniable force, and strict causality has a way of breaking down, permitting the accidental universe to be born with all its unanticipated wonders.

I fell into *Conversations* simply because my friend and editor Alane Salierno Mason told me about a book she was translating that she was very excited about; she was generous enough to let me have a look at her first pages. So the text I read came to me first as a twice-told tale—a translation—and second as something quite new, free of received contexts — unencumbered with expectations.

What resounded across the chasm separating tongues and generations altered me both as a reader and a writer, at what might even be called the molecular level. In a way I had nearly forgotten, *Conversations* urged me to read with my ear, not just for cadence and the vocal quality of words, but for the concrete acoustics of gesture: for a doleful fife stirring up fifteen-year-long armies of mice; for a father's full, empty voice reciting; for the "wordless" whistles of stopped trains; for oranges—"As if they were poisoned. Damned oranges!"—nonetheless peeled and bit into; for the stink of betrayal; herring on the grill; a red shawl; a Mother of Melons; small feet motivating big shoes; ravens mocking shotguns; pounding hooves—a cavalcade; grindstone against metal—for Ezechiele, the sound a wheel makes in the middle of the air; for the "unwritten Caesars," the "unwritten Macbeths"; for "Ah hem! Ah hem!"—the voice of dead brothers.

While it was still in manuscript form, I made this translation a "common text" in two writing workshops. Each week, for the several weeks it took to complete, we devoted a portion of

the class time to reading aloud from *Conversations*, passing it around the table as if it were common bread. I don't know whether it was the vocalization of the words themselves or the passing of the pages from hand to hand, mouth to mouth, but it is evident in the subsequent writings of the workshop participants that the act of producing *Conversations*—even as we consumed it—profoundly affected many of us at the level of language—even, and perhaps most deeply so, those who at the time resisted the demands of the text or else professed not to understand it.

I have two related thoughts about *Conversations* and its place on the bookshelf. First, this novel represents a kind of anti-*Bildungsroman*. It is no modernist tale of a model youth developing from tender bulb and, through adversity, blossoming into maturity. Vittorini's text fundamentally defies the idea of progress.

Rather than as an anti-fascist novel—which it is—I prefer to locate *Conversations* in a more selective category, that of the radical novel. Such radicalism is not primarily ideological in nature. Rather it inheres in the entire fabric of a written work. Its unmistakable identifying feature is the presence of struggle on every level of the narrative—from the substratum of theme to the manifest articulation of concrete language. The "plot" of such a novel may drive forward—terrain may be, in fact must be, covered by the hero—but the essential trajectory is not linear. The landscapes, the personscapes met with and engaged, are not conquered, objectified, quantified, subjugated, either by the writer or the reader. In such a text, the very idea of "forward" (*Avanti!*) turns chimerical. Clock time, the compass and the mile-post rip themselves out of their fixtures and, well, dance. This dance may be a dance of death, yet its consequence is the obverse of nullification.

How many times does the narrator of *Conversations*, following his mother's footsteps, enter and leave the darkened caves of her "patients"? Does it happen once, or a thousand times? In every maneuver, concrete and metaphorical forces engage and struggle, yet never succeed in annihilating one another. The Sicilians who inhabit Vittorini's landscape, whether they are whiskered or non-whiskered fascists; the idea of brother in an actual graveyard, or vice versa; an elision between a father and a grandfather and a Big Lombard who might as well be "Venezuelan" or "Persian"—all take their positions on a sliding scale between allegory and the inescapable familiarity of our own flesh and blood.

Fascism longs for the enactment of the clone. Its ideal is the absolute replication of replication. Extreme repetition. Liberalism (that's us, the children of Disney) seeks to modulate the fascist project by dyeing the wool of identical sheep different colors and attempting thereby to domesticate their monstrosity. The radical novel takes a more dangerous route. Repetition is never pure—variation renounces its liberal role as novelty and gestures, subversively, toward the comparison of incommensurable things. We meet our brother selves, turned to smoke. We meet the others outside us as internal projections in no man's land. Who is he/she to me? How am I of him? What of her is me? We find ourselves in the grip of abstract furies. We *are* abstract furies.

In the radical novel we go not so much forward or backward as up and down, cycling between empyreal and earthly poles. Our movement ceases to be end-oriented and becomes an enactment of the cyclic principle—history turned spiroform. Masters of this knowledge, whatever their origins, have set their sights on something more problematic and challenging than the conquest of history. A generation ago, Sly Stone, the great psychedelic prophet of African-American funk music, professed his will to take his listeners higher. Two generations past, Vittorini's *Conversations* might have marched his reader to victory in Rome or Addis Ababa. He might have left us a monument to frozen language. But his strategy, it seems, was to take us deeper, into the tomb—knowing full well that all movement is reciprocal. And that language is a river that flows both ways. Or, as for Giordano Bruno, a ladder by which nature descends to the production of things, even as the intellect ascends to the knowledge of them.

What makes *Conversations* a great, and radical, work of literature is not its politics. It is Vittorini's language which lends the book, even in translation, a value beyond value—less for what a masterpiece it is in any objective sense, than for what it permits. Thus the narrator's "deaf dream" incites our awakened hearing. His "hopeless calm" agitates our will. This awakening, this mobilization at the level of language allows us to grasp how much is at stake in the water seeping through the soles of our shoes. It makes possible the journey, after years in exile, back to the womb of a text that can no longer contain us, and from which we must once again depart, this time "on tiptoe."

Vittorini's fives sound their inconsolable call. And hearing them we imagine moving air, not just to moan, but to speak—and the conversation goes on.

Subsequent issues of *Frigate* will contain essays by Darton on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* and Chester Himes's *Yesterday Will Make You Cry*.

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