

ABOUT THE ITALIANS

KENELM FOSTER, O.P.

THE Italians are used to visitors. Once over the Alps, as the train runs down to Turin or Milan, you are in a country that is vividly different from every other, but which nothing from outside ever seems to surprise. Italy, after all, has been civilized longer than any land to the north or west of her; and though many centuries have passed since Europe was governed from Rome, she has remained in a sense the continent's centre of gravity, if only as the common focus of historical memories. Is she the world's most visited country? At any rate the foreigner has been coming here since Rome was Rome: pilgrims, priests and conquerors, students, soldiers and tourists, marching up and down the peninsula, roaming, ravaging, ridiculing and revering it. If countries can be revered, there is only one more reverend than Italy. Yet politically she had no national existence until less than a hundred years ago, and has not had a very secure one since. She achieved national unity too late (apart from other considerations) seriously to rival other western nations in the political field, and the fall of Fascism only confirmed this situation. Obviously, the greatness of Italy has little to do with political or military power: indeed her historical achievement, her culture, is not *national* in the sense that English, French, Spanish or even German culture is national. It has never been centred in one capital or one court.

In an interesting recent study of Manzoni,¹ Mr Bernard Wall notes this cultural regionalism of Italy, together with another effect of the absence of a strong national focus. 'I do not wish to imply', writes Mr Wall, 'that all writing in Italy is regional; but when it is not it is usually European or cosmopolitan.' This last observation tempts one to generalize further and suggest that the lack of a national focus has combined with the great, if distant, classical background to give to the chief Italian writers and artists a certain breadth of spirit, a universality, which you will not find so easily elsewhere. It would not be easy to defend this thesis

1 *Manzoni*. 'Studies in Modern European Literature and Thought' (Cambridge, Bowes and Bowes).

point by point, and I will not try to do so here. But under one of its aspects it is argued by Mr Eliot in his essay on Dante, comparing that poet with Shakespeare; and Mr Eliot's remarks on the greater 'universality', the less 'local' character of Dante's language, might be applied *mutatis mutandis* to, say, Leonardo and Michelangelo, Leopardi and Manzoni. Mr Eliot makes it clear that he does not claim that Dante is a *greater* poet than Shakespeare, but only that he expressed himself in a less national and idiosyncratic, a more European way.

It is a far cry from Dante to the average Italian of today (if this phrase may be used of a people still so various and uncentralized), yet this 'average' Italian is the product of much the same broad factors which have conditioned the genius of Italy's greatest sons: the classical past, the Catholic Church, the long lack of political unity, the constant familiarity with the foreigner coming to loot or to learn. These factors underlie the peculiar tolerance of the Italians and their odd blend of pride and humility. I remember the assurance with which a room-full of Italians told me that the Head of the Church could not possibly be chosen from any other race: because, obviously, what is supremely needed in a Pope is 'balance', which is *the* Italian quality: *noi siamo equilibrati*. . . . Yet the same people would readily, even eagerly, admit their inferiority to the English and the Germans, and even the Americans (but not to the French) in other ways, and particularly in anything to do with public order and administration. They are painfully conscious of political weakness, and sometimes of moral weaknesses; they do not claim to be *disciplinati*.

Their tolerance is rather baffling. It is not that they are particularly good at appreciating unfamiliar points of view; for so intelligent a race they are not very quick in that way. They seem to me, by and large, less aware of themselves than we are, less reflective and selfconscious; and though of course this is often an advantage it can be rather limiting. It means that they are better at knowing what they think than how they have come to think it. In argument they tend to miss or minimize the subrational factors underlying any generalization. Hence they generalize readily; doubt less readily; and are less disposed than we to what may be called intellectual sympathy—for sympathy goes out to an individual rather than to his ideas, or to the ideas only through the individual. The assurance with which quite ordinary Italians will

theorize in the abstract is to an Englishman surprising. It is partly, no doubt, the national gift for rhetorical expression, partly an inherited stock of clear ideas, and partly a real 'flair' for the abstract. But to use it seems curious and, sometimes, comic—comically *un*-selfconscious. Foreigners, of course, are usually funny to the English; and this sort of funniness is essentially unconscious. For every conscious clown shares, or pretends to share, the prejudices of his audience, and this the foreigner, by definition, cannot do or do well. Of course the Italian finds us funny too, from time to time; but the Englishman, I fancy, has the advantage here: his greater selfconsciousness gives him a keener eye for the unconscious drollery of the foreigner, especially of the Latin. It is in this one respect that the English visitor to the continent is never disappointed: everything else may go wrong with his trip, but he always finds the foreigner funny, and especially the Latin. The amusement is mutual, no doubt, but the Englishman laughs more because he is more selfconscious.

Yet, comic or irritating (according to mood and circumstance) as this Italian habit of 'large discourse' may be, it is admirable in its way; and one's personal or national conceit has to take refuge in the thought that these very articulate Latins have their own sort of . . . obtuseness. How intolerant they are sometimes! How they lecture!

And yet there is that charming tolerance of theirs, too, that unconscious kindness and urbanity which you meet everywhere in Italy. Ezra Pound, laid up in hospital once (in or near Genoa, probably), was asked by an old nun whether he was a Catholic. He answered 'No'. 'Well then, a Protestant?' 'No, not a Protestant either.' It took her some time to absorb this double denial; while Pound explained, with some care, that he believed in Zeus and Apollo. At last a very tender smile came into the nun's eyes, and she said: '*Eh! Z'è tutta una religione!*'² It would be heavy-handed to call this Indifferentism, but it seems to me very Italian. And other examples, concerned with less or equally serious topics, will occur to anyone who knows the peninsula: examples recalling the humour of that most Italian of Popes, Pius IX, who observed in his old age that the only people who seemed to have made nothing out of the Risorgimento were himself and Gari-

² 'Well, it's a religion, anyway.'

baldi; or, in a more serious vein, how after the death of his other great enemy Cavour the old Pope was heard murmuring to himself: 'Ah, how he loved his country, that Cavour, that Cavour. He was a true Italian . . . God will surely have pardoned him, as we pardon him.'³

Such random instances do not *prove* anything about national character, but I am encouraged to take them as hints and pointers by another passage in Mr Wall's *Manzoni* where he makes the *Promessi Sposi* his text for some reflections on what he calls 'Italian cynicism', a quality not unconnected with the 'tolerance' I am trying to describe. Mr Wall has noticed that Manzoni's great novel, in one of its aspects, is the story of a struggle between the rich and the poor, with the poor on the defensive. And it is the heroine's mother, the peasant woman Agnese—warmhearted, gossipy and just a trifle unscrupulous—who expresses most vividly the standpoint of the Italian poor. It may be recalled that the marriage of her daughter Lucia with honest young Renzo is threatened by the local lord who wants Lucia for himself. 'Renzo', writes Mr Wall, 'his promised bride Lucia, and . . . Agnese, now hold a council of war. Agnese has led a life of toil, and she is cynical about the powers that be. . . . She expresses herself in an idiom that is so Italian in its *nuances* that it is hardly translatable into any other language. "Don't be surprised" (she) says on a later occasion; "when you've known the world as long as I have, you'll realize that things aren't to be wondered at. All the gentry are a bit mad, some more, some less, some in one way, some in another. The best thing to do is to let them talk . . . especially if you need them. Just look as if you were listening and they were talking sense". And Mr Wall continues: 'Stendhal also understood this Italian cynicism, though he never saw it from the point of view of the streets and fields. It is, after all, Count Mosca's advice in the *Chartreuse de Parme*: "Believe or not, as you choose, what they teach you, but *never raise any objection*". . . . It is by a certain deceit that Italians have defended their liberty for a thousand years. I say a thousand years because it is only for bookish historians that Italian liberty came in with the Risorgimento. It has always existed, under the Spaniards and Austrians, as under the Bourbons and Mussolini. Italian liberty is not a public achievement based on

³ See *Pio Nono*, by E. E. Y. Hales, London, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1954, pp. 121 and 227.

freedom of the press and honest law-courts. It is a private achievement that one tries to make fool-proof against the State. Agnese takes it for granted that the authorities are the enemies of poor people. Therefore poor people who have any sense must find a way round the law. . . .'⁴

Mr Wall knows his Italy, and all this strikes me as intelligent. But I think he exaggerates the Italian indifference to 'public liberty' and the State. The Italians may have been a long time winning these things for themselves, but they have fought and suffered much to win them, against severe handicaps; and as for 'honest law-courts' and clean administration generally, the recent prodigious outcry over the Montesi scandal is hardly evidence of the Italian public's cynicism. Mere cynicism would shrug its shoulders. Yet the term has a certain aptness, of course. Perhaps the essential point is that the Italians are extremely quick to distinguish between a man and his office, rank or wealth. Money, titles, power, office—all these are circumstances, external additions to human nature which is really unaffected by them. Human nature is always the same. This is not of course (or not necessarily) a scepticism about divine grace. It is a discernment, uncommonly clear in this long-suffering and long-civilized race, of the essentially human limitations. It can look very like cynicism, just as Italian anti-clericalism can look very like unbelief. Indeed the anti-clerical tradition in Italy, which is not anti-Catholicism, though it leads to it from time to time, has always drawn its strength precisely from that clear discernment of human nature in the priest: from Dante's indignation, through Boccaccio's ironic indulgence and the impatient scorn of Machiavelli, down to our own day Italian literature is full of an apparent cynicism about ecclesiastics. And Manzoni's Don Abbondio, that immortal coward, is perhaps the best single example of all.

Yet with the figure of Don Abbondio this Italian discernment of the man in the official achieves a poise so perfect in its subtle lucidity that the rough term 'cynicism' becomes utterly inadequate. In portraying his *povero curato* Manzoni is quite lucid, but never pitiless. Discerning with an eye as clear, if not as bold, as Dante's, the man in the priest, Manzoni is as sympathetic as he is severe. He sees the man in the official, but himself in the man; for,

4 Op. cit., p. 27. In the quotation from the *Promessi Sposi* I have altered slightly the version used by Mr Wall (A. Colquhoun's *The Betrothed*, London; J. M. Dent, 1951).

as Mr Wall acutely remarks, 'he knew a good deal about cowardice as well as about moral principles'. Morally strict as he is, he never gives himself airs, never forgets the mote and the beam; his bad people are all weak people, and no less so when they pretend to be strong. His novel is a marvellous blend of severity and compassion. Hence the indefinably subtle irony of its style; hence its profoundly Catholic substance. But it is no less Italian than it is Catholic. I do not mean, of course, that the Manzonian moral balance is usually *achieved* in Italian life, still less that a Manzonian irony is the rule in Italian prose, but I mean that that balance is a recognizably Italian ideal, made up of elements which the genius of Italy, as exemplified in her saints no less than in her artists, has always striven, and not without brilliant successes, to build into a harmony. To discern, with special clarity, the permanent human substance, unconfused by (if by no means always indifferent to) the trappings of pomp and circumstance; to see the nobility and the limitations of common humanity; that is the Italian habit of mind—with of course the normal human accompaniment of vice and folly. And this habit of mind, though critical—because it sharply divides a man from what King Lear called his 'lendings'—is also deeply inclined to fellow-feeling and a sort of pity, to the complex sentiment that Italians convey with the adjective *povero* and its diminutives. It is no accident that Italy's patron saint is the *Poverello*.

I said they strive for harmony; and speaking of Italy, the harmony one thinks of is visible: the shape and colour of space, the human face and body. Is there any country that can equal the Italian record in the visual arts? They have had the best eyes in Europe; and even today the traveller who enters Italy by train from the north, and particularly from France, may well feel, as he watches the towns and farm-buildings go by, that here at any rate a sense of beauty is the rule rather than the exception. But the Italians know very well that this is not enough.