

INEDITO

GILBERTE

An Avant-Garde Novel About a Jewish Girl

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Perhaps a comparison between myself as a writer and personality and Ignazio Apolloni as a novelist and personage, will make clearer why Apolloni writes in an avant-garde manner. I am an “Open Book” and just for this reason alone cannot make any claim of ever having been a respectable citizen of the middle-class. My middle-class friends reveal nothing to me, and the members of my immediate family hide certain secrets from me because they are afraid I will reveal dirty linen or write stories about them. And yet, once Ignazio Apolloni himself said to me: “In your book, *Bye Bye America* (short stories) sei borghese.” However, he should have added: “You are on the lowest rung of the middle-class, with both your feet in the simplest, the most vulgar expressions of language, even if your father was a lawyer. And you still think, too, the writer must express each and every ‘vulgar’ truth.”

Ignazio Apolloni, instead, is bourgeois!! From the crown of his head to the soles of his very elegant deerskin moccasins. He willingly observes (obeys!?) all middle-class rules and regulations, in his writings. In fact, he never writes about himself or any of the members of his family, thus never embarrassing any of them. Neither does he ever write about his friends or the writers in his literary movements or poetry reviews.

In his very long novel, *Gilberte*, I recognized the name of only one avant-garde writer (Aurelio Pes from Palermo), and probably that must have been a slip. In a certain way, then, Ignazio’s approach to literature, through essentially a middle-class mind, prepares the author with those qualities necessary for avant-garde writing; nothing personal, a certain distance between the novelist and his text (the story itself), preferably intellectual and professional. Still better, the whole of his story expresses good taste, is elegant, and avoids anything that is vulgar. But if something uncouth does creep into this prose, it must immediately be reduced to the terms of irony and thus placed under the control of a cultivated mind and the laughs of the humorist: the middle-class and, more so, the upper middle-class, will really have something to chew on, then. I shall not hesitate to say this: therefore, we have here a novel for the upper-middle class and even some members of Europe’s and America’s nobility will enjoy many pages of *Gilberte*.

I frankly believe Ignazio Apolloni did quite a bit of research to perfect the presentation of his facts about Europe, notwithstanding the fact he must have been to all the places he mentions.

He knows everything about the finest things in cultivated European life: good food, excellent wine, clothes for all occasions, the best of hotels, lovely gardens and spots from where there are beautiful scenic views which his

poetic mind can appreciate and write about. If he sometimes leads his reader to out-of-the-way places, he always gives sufficient information about these cities and places to make them particular and interesting, leaving the impression he has really been to these places.

Nevertheless, the author leaves the general scope of the entire novel, taken as a whole, ambiguous and yet, strangely, fundamentally clear in many of his brief sketches and episodes. Fortunately, after establishing in the first pages of his novel about whom and what he is writing, Apolloni begins varying the text from sketch to sketch. This definitely gives him the absolute freedom to deal with his own personal thoughts, ideas, and theories. The photographer and first person protagonist, the 'artist' of the novel, does not seem to have a name, so I shall give him Ignazio's. However, I shall remove from him Ignazio's philosophical and scientific thoughts, poetics, and theories, giving them back to him those soliloquies in the independent sketches which help to make Gilberte such an exceptionally successful writing, from my point of view. Ignazio Apolloni does not get bogged down by the need to respect the "untrue" story (the plot) of the novel. He does come back to the story telling of the central theme often enough, the narration about the photographer's Jewish girlfriend, a young lady who probably looked like (in the mind of the author) the lovely lady and Hollywood actress, Merle Oberon – his ideal? Apolloni gives us a detailed description of Gilberte, her interesting and exceptional international past, her successes and the racial difficulties of her family and people in different parts of Europe.

But we must not forget or neglect to say the reason why the author chose the central theme around which to build the structure, unusual, of his 'free' episodes and 'open' sketches, the thinking of thoughts and asides, at times, just surprisingly short comments often concluding in surprise endings. Why? The author is a lawyer, in a place like Palermo where he has sought to practice a profession with a sense of justice: and justice for the Jews, finally, from this ethical inclination. I was once one of his legal clients, and, therefore, I know Apolloni is imbued with these attitudes. I am able to provide testimony, for I am his witness. Obviously, an Italian lawyer who is a gentile and who chooses to write about the Jewish nation favorably (in his way of course), and elegantly, must be trying to express justice where very little justice has been meted out, in the past. Perhaps I am going overboard in searching into Ignazio Apolloni's background to explain why being "borghese" helps in writing elegant avant-garde literature and why this novel is held together by the undercurrent and unquenchable thirst for justice, so important when we deal with any writing about the Jews.

And also he writes brilliantly about French food, giving so much apparently excellent information as to make himself appear as the connoisseur in this area, of the best of cooks for the joy or fear (?) of any housewife. He would have become an extraordinary taster of foods for a king or emperor, sending bad as well as incompetent cooks to the gallows. But it is Ignazio's joy and

delight that is expressed here, in the use of different European languages to describe the subtle flavors of foods to bring the reader into a world of dreams, where most readers (and writers, too) hardly ever get to go.

Writing in “diary” form, therefore, gives the author the opportunity to overcome the tremendously great difficulty for avant-garde writers, that of becoming too abstract and general or too impersonal in form. The two forms, the use of the first person and the ‘open’ and disconnected sketches, so seemingly diametrically opposite one another, and yet, one a helping harness and the other freeing him of that same harness, the “plot”. Actually, the first person is the strong, thin thread tying together all the vague dreams, the theoretical notions and scientific equations Apolloni proposes, about the universe, about genetics, about poetics, too. These observations, at times, tend toward a theological conclusion: “Who is behind all this?” And, immediately after that question, followed by: “Then what!?” I think this is his most important philosophical question, because I know it is the last line of verse in one of Ignazio’s most important poems in an avant-garde style. Fortunately there are hints and explanations mixed with intelligent “doubt” regarding the material substance and form of the world and its activity which is its form. All this meets on the universe’s level as well as on the levels of the smallest sub-atomical particles, right down to electrons and photons. They all end up “in a puff of wind” or “nothing at all.” Just “vento” in a clenched fist, concludes the author, a writer who really does his own thinking.

Though I am not an avant-garde writer (obviously), I admit I find myself going back to Apolloni’s novel to reread many of the sketches I liked only in part, trying to find meaning, trying to join phrases to phrases, trying to complete these particular sketches myself, angrily. Angrily, because something that has begun beautifully, must in the end be brought to completion.

I stopped when I realized I was falling into Ignazio’s trap, interpreting any ambiguous part of the text into a reader’s point of view, thus participating and filling in, rewriting parts of the novel. My excuse now, covering up for my simplicity is: I was only trying to get at what the author was driving at, trying to figure out how Apolloni would have really completed his sketch if he had put his shoulder to the wheel.

How would an American publishing house have edited a novel like this? The only other writer I know well who gave his editor and publishing house a difficult time of it was Thomas Wolfe, not the Tom Wolfe I introduced the Sicilian audience to, and whom I interpreted for, in the Politeama Theater in the city of Palermo, years ago. That Wolfe wrote about Hippies in his book, *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

Instead, I am now talking about the Thomas Wolfe who was an unending writer of novels. His text was more continuous than Apolloni’s and precisely that was its difficulty, it never stopped, and therefore was similar in weight and volume at least, and had the originality of expression and form as

Ignazio's *Gilberte*. The editor simply took close to 1000 pages from a monstrous mountain-heap of a manuscript on Thomas Wolfe's desk and said to him: "These pages are your next novel." In reading Thomas Wolfe and Ignazio Apolloni, I had similar sensations and thoughts of the originality of the two authors, who are both unique.

Ignazio Apolloni's humanity is beautifully expressed when he cleverly uses the English word "feeling" regarding a lost cat. I have experienced the exact, same "feeling."

I should venture to say the most enlightening and satisfying parts of the novel for me were those which dealt with France and Israel. Perhaps the least convincing, even though the author lived there for many years, were the pages dealing with the United States. I had conflicting feelings reading Ignazio's prose here, as if the author were holding something back. Maybe the business class in America on the higher levels of society is less known to the author, as it certainly is to me.

I find myself comparing the first person in *Gilberte*, the supposed photographer without a name to "Nessuno" (Nobody) or Odysseus and the first person in the landfalls of the *Odyssey*. Even raising the issue of who that first person really is, the photographer or himself, is comparable to the enigma of trying to figure out who Homer was and whether this blind author was the blind singer Demodokos at Scheria or Tiresias (also blind), in the Land of the Dead, or Prof. L.G. Pocock's Sicilian sailor probably blind, too, or the young, aggressive princess, Nausicaa, as Samuel Butler, the great British novelist of the last century, wanted it. If Ignazio Apolloni becomes famous, perhaps this kind of enigma will haunt his novel, too.

The little sketch of the frogs and Moses is not only delightfully humorous, but very appropriate to the general theme of *Gilberte*, the Jewish question, the Return, and Ignazio Apolloni's fables, when he is at his best.

I think a good number of these gems, if taken from the novel, could be gathered together into a smaller publication and used in the Italian and American public schools to provoke the sensibility of the students and show them how some authors of today can write.