

## BOOK REVIEWS / RECENSIONI

### JOSEPH FRANCESE, *The Unpopular Realism of Vincenzo Padula*.

In the last few decades, much has been written on the South of Italy and its writers after and in light of the Unification in 1861. Especially in the Anglophone world, there has been a renewed focus on Southern writers in the context of a unification understood as a process of internal colonization or, if not in these terms, at least as a very problematic process with negative consequences for the South. Above all, Sicilian authors like Capuana, Verga and Pirandello have been scrutinised and their works revisited and reinterpreted with new theoretical approaches. However, there is still a lot left to investigate in terms of less known and less prominent authors from Sicily and the rest of Southern Italy.

The declared aim of Joseph Francese in his monograph *The Unpopular Realism of Vincenzo Padula* is “to introduce to an Anglophone audience (and remind Italophones of) Vincenzo Padula” (1), a minor writer from Aciri, Calabria. Padula, like other better-known authors, was very much in favour of the Unification and, at the same time, critical of the way in which it was pursued. Far from being against the new Italian government or the Savoy, Francese is on point when he mentions Scarfoglio’s definition of Padula as an ‘organic intellectual’ to the newly formed state. Nevertheless, Padula is not a blind supporter of it; indeed, he criticises the inability of *piemontesi* to understand Southern cultures and people and, consequently, to legislate in favour of the South. However, at the same time, he is also very critical towards the *latifondisti* and the middle and upper bourgeoisie of Calabria, guilty of being nostalgic of the Bourbons, too lazy and attached to their own traditional privileges. Francese is shrewd in highlighting Padula’s critical oscillations as they are evident in his most important work, the periodical *Il Burzio*, published in the two-year period 1864-1865.

The first part of the book provides an overview of Padula’s life, thought and writing. Given the fact that Padula is a minor writer, it is helpful in contextualising *Il Burzio* to which the second part is dedicated. The introductory chapter gives some reference points in which to locate Padula’s writing; some of Padula’s contradictions and

innovative thoughts are already anticipated here, giving the picture of a quite complex figure. It also heralds the importance of a literary character invented by Padula, Mariuzza, who from a literary point of view probably constitutes the most original aspect of *Il Burzio*. The following chapter, "His Life", sketches the most important and useful personal and literary events to frame the writer. The third chapter, "Padula's Obscurity", speaks about the writer's originality which is also, as the title suggests, the reason identified by Francese for which Padula was not well received at his time and accordingly almost forgotten later on. "What distinguish Padula from his contemporaries are his attempts to make the Calabrian *forma mentis* – along with the socio-economic and historical factors that determined and conditioned it – comprehensible to Northern Italians" (31), writes Francese. To support the scholar's observation, one can indeed notice that the desire to make the people and culture of the South known to the North of Italy is a fairly common trait of southern authors after unification, especially among *veristi*, concerned with the description of the local reality and the more humble people. However, Padula with *Il Burzio* seems to anticipate these themes; it will suffice to say that the first publication on popular culture by one of the most known Italian folklorists of the time, Giuseppe Pitrè, came out in 1868 (*Sui canti popolari siciliani. Studio critico*) and "Nedda" by Verga was published in 1874.

It is not by chance that I mentioned Pitrè, who is the reference point of the fourth chapter ("Padula Demopsicologo"). Francese compares the Sicilian and *calabrese* folklorists to underscore the difference between the two. According to the scholar, "it would seem that behind Pitrè's contribution to the project of nation building is the proposal that the study of subaltern culture would uncover a lowest common denominator from which to excogitate a single model or general system of *italianità*" (38). However Padula focuses his attention on *calabrese* folklore not to show how it can be similar to the rest of Italy, but rather different. His concern was to make the *piemontesi* understand that people in Calabria were different from the north of Italy and therefore they should have taken into account those differences while governing the newly formed nation. According to him, unity was not made of sameness, but of multiplicity. Writing from South Africa as I am, one would think that Padula was imagining for Italy a rainbow nation

project *ante litteram*. Unfortunately, as we know, things took a different path.

In chapter five, “De Sanctis and Croce”, Francese briefly describes the two critics’ view on Padula’s work. The following chapter, “Padula’s (Un)popular Realism”, repeats and explains the general title of the book by showing “Padula’s attempt at a (national) popular realism whose effect was, as we see, quite the opposite” (47). According to Francese, Padula’s was a genuine attempt to understand and give voice to the Other – Other meant both in terms of class and gender – even if the outcome was “not without their limitations and paternalistic notes” (48). Representing the Other always comes hand in hand with a language choice. Padula too, Francese underlines, was faced with the perennial Italian (but not only Italian) question of the language, caught as all *veristi* were between two different needs: to be faithful to the object of representation on one hand and to be understood by people not familiar with that object on the other hand. Francese dedicated the second part of this chapter to how Padula deals with the language question, showing through examples his preference for “spoken – not aulic, written – Tuscan as a national language” (49).

All the chapters described so far are a necessary introduction to the heart of the book, which is made up of the five following chapters, all dealing with different aspects of *Il Burzio*. Chapter seven, which carries the name of the journal in the title, looks at the overall publication and its main topics. It is in this chapter that one really gets a complete idea of *Il Burzio* in its general characterisations. Here Francese pays particular attention to the people and institutions that Padula deems at the centre of the Southern question – at least to the extent that concerns Cosenza specifically and Calabria in general. Francese underlines how Padula’s double aim is on one hand to expose the ignorance of Northern people towards Southern affairs, and on the other hand to denounce the misgovernment and corruption of middle and high classes in the South. One example of the latter is the *Eletto*, who “served as a combined investigating and prosecuting magistrate who both levied and collected fines, and brought before the competent tribunals all cases regarding purveyors of spoiled foodstuffs, merchants without proper licenses, and those whose scales were poorly calibrated (causing unmerited, increased costs to the consumer), or who otherwise charged more than the law allowed” (77). As for the stance towards the north, called “*il*

*piemontesismo*”, Francese is cautious in mentioning that “there is not even a hint in *Il Bruzio* that *il piemontesismo* was a euphemism for a *conquista regia* nor for a colonization. But *il piemontesismo* was indeed an obstacle to the progressive mission of *Il Bruzio*, that of transforming society by catalyzing microscopic shifts in public opinion, concerned as Padula was with every-day, quality-of-life issues and consensus” (78). This is an important note, that reminds us once again of the position taken for example by Verga in Sicily.

Chapter eight is dedicated to the rubric “Lo Stato delle persone in Calabria”, which is a description of people and their living conditions in Calabria according to their social and economic status. Here once again one can find numerous reminders of Verga and Sicilian writers. Furthermore, specific attention is devoted to women, describing for example the lives and work of *montanine* and *impastatrici*, without forgetting to mention the abuses, including sexual ones, to which they were subjected. Women then become the protagonists of the following two chapters, to underscore their importance in *Il Burzio*. In Chapter eleven, “Women Correspond with ‘Il Bruzio’”, Francese finds the seed in a letter received by the journal for the creation of Mariuzza as a fictional literary character supposedly writing letters to *Il Burzio*: “From Amarilli’s letter and Padula’s response to her, and in the absence of a declaration of poetics by Padula, it may be possible to cull at least two ideas from this exchange. First, it is quite legitimate to surmise that Amarilli sparked Padula’s decision to interact with middle-class women. Based on this assumption, I propose that, in addition, we see in his response to Amarilli the initial stage of the development of a narrative strategy for the creation of a female voice” (135). In the chapters, various correspondence between some women and *Il Burzio* are analysed, laying the foundation for the next chapter, “Mariuzza bis”. The analysis of Mariuzza’s character and her writing in the journal is particularly interesting as Francese shows how her development follows Padula’s one and it is strictly linked to the fate of *Il Burzio*. Indeed she evolves from being one correspondent among many others, with a quite light way of writing, to be Padula’s “daughter”, defending her father from his enemies. Another interesting aspect is her social condition, her being a humble woman who apparently needs someone else’s help to write her letters. Francese carefully analyses Mariuzza’s writing evolution as well, demonstrating how not only her position but

also her writing develop throughout the issues of *Il Burzio*. Ultimately, a picture emerges according to which the character of Mariuzza is in fact one of the most precious and original inventions of Padula in his journal.

Thus, we arrive at the epilogue of this literary venture, described in the second last chapter, "Prelude and End of *Il Bruzio*", in which Francese analyses the political and financial reasons that led to the closure of the journal. In the last chapter, "Conclusion", the author briefly summarises Padula's position in light of the unification and the Southern question. He states that "while Padula was by no means a revolutionary and his proposals for social renewal were intended to strengthen the New Italy, his denunciations cut to the quick" (179). Far from conceptualising the unification as a process of colonization, Padula was a real supporter of the Savoy and, at the same time, very critical about the work of the government; however, he also believed "that redemption could only come from the outside" (179).

The book, as stated at the beginning of this review, serves as an introduction to Padula. It is indeed a very good starting point for someone who wants to pursue more studies on this minor author. One can find, for example, many seeds for a post-colonial analysis of *Il Burzio*, which is out of Francese's intentions even though he seeds a few hints here and there that could grow in a postcolonial reading.

This monograph also has the advantage of being easily accessible, with precise and clear writing. The only reading difficulty is in the editorial choice to have endnotes instead of footnotes. The apparatus of notes, in fact, is very conspicuous and helps the text (the notes are not simple bibliographic references, but very often additional explanations which, had they been in the text, would have weighed it down too much). However, the endnotes actually make it difficult to read hand in hand with the text – even more so if one reads the electronic version rather than the paper version.

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