





Ignazio Silone, the man who saved himself

by Andrea Paganini*



Left:
Silone in 1950.

This page:
Silone in the library of
the Associazione Italiana
Libertà e Cultura (AIRC).

Pescina razed to the ground by the 1915 earthquake.

*"[...] what God really did, God only knows."*¹

The figure of Ignazio Silone – the archetypal Italian anti-Fascist – has recently split historians and intellectuals into two apparently irreconcilable factions in a hotly debated controversy that, despite the many articles and books already published on the issue, shows no sign of abating. So what is it all about?

Let's start with the certain, undisputed fact that emerged from the Italian State Archives and was made public just over a decade ago. On the 13th of April 1930 in Locarno, Silone wrote a "last letter" to Guido Bellone, a high-ranking Fascist police official. The much-debated question is what was the nature of the previous correspondence between these two men? Was Silone the cleverest and most effective informer for the Fascist police, as the historians Dario Biocca and Mauro Canali² allege, or was he a consistently indefatigable enemy of Mussolini's regime, as Giuseppe Tamburrano³ claims (just to mention the leading protagonists of the two opposing sides in this dispute)? Who was Ignazio Silone in reality? And how should we interpret his works?

Anyone wishing to study Ignazio Silone's intellectual biography in depth and discover the truth surrounding the man needs to go beyond the basic dichotomy of innocent versus guilty (as his widow, Darina Laracy, suggested on the 1st of May 2000 in Pescina in an address to the scientific community). But first, a little background.

Secondino Tranquilli

"Once upon a time, here in Pietrasecca," he said, "there was a man called Carlo Campanella, while in New York there was a man called Mr. Charles Little-Bell, Ice and Coal. Was it one and the same man or two?"
"The same person," many people replied.
*"If a man can change his name, why not a playing card too?" said the priest.*⁴

After the 1915 Abruzzo earthquake, Secondino Tranquilli (Ignazio Silone's real name) became a homeless orphan at the age of 15 with an uncertain future ahead of him. He was personally involved in the social problems faced by the poorer sections of his



community and took part in small uprisings. When just 17 he became a member of the Italian Union of Young Socialists, marking the start of a militant political career that would last more than a decade. Two years later, already known to the police as a subversive, Silone became the Secretary of the Rome branch of the Socialist Union. Then, in 1921, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) split and the revolutionary off-shoot formed the Italian Communist Party (Pcd'I or PCI). Tranquilli was one of the founders, along with Amadeo Bordiga and Antonio Gramsci, and soon one of the new political party's leaders with special responsibility for the press. In the meantime, Mussolini, head of the newly formed Fascist Party, was sworn in as Prime Minister of Italy at the end of October 1922. Since he had a police record, Tranquilli was forced to flee the country. He moved to Berlin, then Madrid and finally Paris, where he co-ordinated communication between the political exiles and wrote for a left-wing paper.

In 1925 he was back in Italy working in the PCI press office when the Fascist dictatorship came into being. Like all members of the opposition parties, he was declared an outlaw and forced to lead a life in the underground. In 1927, during a Communist plenum in Moscow, he saw Stalin come to power, about which he had great reservations. Shortly afterwards many members of the PCI were arrested by the Fascists and Tranquilli therefore returned to France, full of doubts about recent developments in Russian communism and extremely critical of the authoritarian policy adopted by the

Party. He disapproved of the intolerant and abusive tendencies, not to mention its absolute inability to accommodate differing ideas.

At the same time, Tranquilli had to deal with a new family crisis. His brother Romolo, who had been arrested in 1928 on charges of having conspired against the regime, was sentenced to a 12-year prison term; he would die four years later in the prison at Procida as a result of the exceedingly poor conditions under which he was held.

[Locarno] 13th April 1930

*"[...] there was an unbridgeable gap between my apparent life and my secret life. [...] Politics seemed senseless. What did all that stuff matter to me? I'd certainly have preferred to live in peace, to have two or three square meals a day and let 'the necessity of imperial expansion' and 'economic democracy' go to the devil."*⁵

Towards the end of the 1920s, the future writer experienced a major life crisis, compounded by health problems and an uneasy conscience. This led him to write the now famous letter to the Fascist police official. The full text reads:

"My apologies for not writing further. What you wanted to know is no longer a secret (the papers already speak of it). I don't know what I and my friends will do now.

My health is terrible but the cause is moral. (You will understand, if you remember what I wrote last summer.) I find myself at an extremely painful point in my life. The sense of morality, which has always been strong in me, now overwhelms me completely; it does not let me sleep, eat or have a minute's rest. I am at a crossroads, and there is only one way to go: I must abandon militant politics completely (I shall look for some kind of intellectual activity). The only other option is death. Continuing to live in such a state of contradiction was impossible, is impossible. I was born to be an honest landowner in my hometown. Life has thrown me on to a course that I now want to leave behind. My conscience tells me I have not done great harm either to my friends or to my country. Within the limits of what was possible, I have always tried not to do harm. I must say that, given your position, you have always acted

as a gentleman with me. And so I write you this last letter. I trust that you will not try to prevent my plan, which will be carried out in two stages: first, I will eliminate from my life all that is false, duplicitous, equivocal and secretive; second, I will begin a new life, on a new basis, in order to repair the evil that I have done, to seek redemption, to do only good for the workers, for the peasants (to whom I am bound with every fibre of my heart) and for my country.

Between the first and second stage, I need a bit of physical, intellectual and moral rest. No material considerations have influenced my decision. I am not afraid of hardship. What I want is to live morally.

The influence and popularity I enjoy among many emigrants have led me to conceive of my future activity (as soon as my health permits) as a form of truly independent literary and publishing work. I should add that, at the present time, great changes are afoot in my ideology and so I feel re-attracted, very attracted, by religion (if not the Church) and that the evolution of my thought is made easier by the stupid and criminal direction being adopted by the Communist Party. The only thing that makes me regretful about this decision is the fact that it has become a persecuted party with thousands of workers acting in good faith, if we exclude the leaders. To avoid influencing the basic elements, I have decided not to announce my break with the party publicly and intend to wait until the time is right, hopefully soon.

Please treat this letter as an expression of my esteem for you. I wish to end, definitively, our long period of honest relationship with an act of honesty. If you are a believer, pray to God that He will give me the strength to overcome my remorse, to begin a new life and to live it for the good of the workers and of Italy.

Yours, Silvestri"⁶

On the basis of this letter – and the previous ones attributed to him – the "historians for the prosecution" claim that Silone had infiltrated the PCI from 1923 onwards (or even earlier) and fed the Italian Police information on its underground organisation, thus engaging in a risky game of duplicity requiring an extremely difficult balancing act. The "historians for the defence" reject these alle-

gations, refuting the authenticity of the majority of the letters or that they are correctly attributed to Silone. They also maintain that he only wanted, at the end of the 1920s, to make the OVRA (*Opera Vigilanza Repressione Antifascismo* [Organisation for Vigilance against Anti-Fascist Activities]) to believe he was willing to collaborate with them in order to help his imprisoned brother. Others are convinced that the correspondence was “instrumental” in nature and thus his guilt is “very slight.”⁷

The final verdict on the writer from Abruzzo, his honour and his credibility, seems, therefore, to depend on these two opposing and irreconcilable views. Was Silone an abject, despicable informer who betrayed the anti-Fascist cause, or was he an honest intransigent freedom fighter pitched against all forms of totalitarianism? Needless to say, some have attempted to reconcile the two positions and have inevitably ended up in at a dead end, suggesting madness or schizophrenia, or seeing Silone as a kind of Doctor Jekyll/Mr. Hyde. But why should such an extreme verdict, one way or the other, be necessary?

At this point we need to step back and approach the matter from a different angle, looking further back in time, without rejecting any possibility *a priori*. We need to focus on the crucial year, 1930, the crossroads in Silone’s life and an unavoidable starting point for any serious explanation of his life and works.

End of the crisis – the turning point

“[...] it would be necessary to go far from one’s country. A change of name is not enough, if the water, the stones, the grass, the plants and the dust on the road are those of the town in which one was born. One must go far away.”

*The monk said this in such a grave voice that Don Paolo had to stifle an impulse to embrace him.*⁸

The turning point for Silone, 1930, coincides with the period when Fascism enjoyed great power and unprecedented popular consensus after the elections and the signing of the Concordat with the Holy See. By the time Silone settled in Switzerland his relations with the PCI had become strained and frayed. Far from his native land and old friends, Silone felt guilty about his brother

Romolo’s terrible punishment. He was also suffering from nerves and lung disease. This was when he severed all relations with both the OVRA and the PCI, the party that for the past decade had been for him “family, school, church and barracks: [...] a totalitarian system in the most complete and genuine sense of the word.”⁹

So what caused him to take this decision? Perhaps his brother Romolo’s fate? Or the totalitarian tendencies of Communism? Perhaps his recognition of the cruelty of the Italian Police, by that time part and parcel of the Fascist regime? Or maybe a crisis of conscience due to the revival of his moral and religious awareness? Perhaps all of this together.

Unable to leave the Communist Party on his own initiative, it is likely that Silone did all he could to get himself expelled (as effectively happened in 1931) and so end his double life. It is clear that his decision to sever all contacts is totally devoid of any political opportunism, as both Fascism in Italy and Communism on an international level were at a peak at the time and there were no signs that they would fall from power. His decision to distance himself from both parties cannot, therefore, be explained as a change to another allegiance, but simply as the result of a moral impulse. This new-found morality also explains the crisis of conscience that led him to break with all facets of his previous life.

There is no doubt that this was not a spur-of-the-moment decision to rediscover the religious *Weltanschauung* of his early teenage years, but something he had been considering over the years. Indeed, in the late 1920s, he had written to his companion Gabriella Seidenfeld: “I realise that all my thoughts now are the same as those I had at the age of 15.”¹⁰ In July 1929, according to recently released documents, Tranquilli informed Bellone that “at the point at which [he found his] moral and intellectual development” it would be “impossible to continue the same relationship with [him] as 10 years ago.”¹¹ (If, indeed, his collaboration with the police dated back to 1919, it should be noted that neither the National Fascist Party nor the Communist Party existed at that time. The natures of these political parties – especially the Italian Communist Party – were far from well-defined in their early years.)

Portrait photo of
Ignazio Silone in 1950.

The letter dated 13th April 1930 is an extremely intense moral and emotional work. He says he is tormented by an acute crisis of conscience and is at an extremely painful point in his life, with only two possible ways forward: suicide or a completely different way of life. He claims that he has reached a “crossroads” in his life, that he wishes to abandon militant politics and can no longer live in such a state of “ambiguity.” He wants to find a “way out” in order “to begin a new life” free of “all that is false, duplicitous, equivocal and secretive” and intends to “repair the evil” he has done, “to seek redemption”, “to live morally.” He then says he wants to dedicate himself to “truly independent literary and publishing work.” He also adds that “great changes are afoot” in his way of thinking and that he feels “re-attracted, very attracted, by religion.” He ends by saying that he hopes God will give him “the strength to overcome [his] remorse,” “to begin a new life” and to live it “for the good of the workers and of Italy.”

How can we fail to perceive in this letter a strong similarity to what Silone would write in his *Emergency Exit* many years later as he recalled that traumatic yet decisive time, likening it to a woman's labour in giving birth? “[...] I seem to have become another man entirely: at the time, I was thirty years old, I had just left the Communist Party, to which I had sacrificed my youth, my studies and every personal interest; I was gravely ill and

without any means of support; without family (I had become an orphan at age fifteen, my only remaining brother was then in prison as a Catholic antifascist and, soon after, died in prison); I had been expelled from France and from Spain; I could not return to Italy; in a word, I was on the verge of suicide.

In that period I underwent a terrible crisis, but one that brought me salvation. As Saint Bernard wrote in one of his books, there are men that God chases, persecutes and searches out and, if He finds them, He grabs them, mangles them, tears them to pieces, bites them, chews them up, swallows and digests them; and then He creates them as entirely new creatures, creatures that are entirely His own. If I think back on the sufferings, the dangers, the errors and the penitence suffered by my many friends and myself, it seems that we had that painful and privileged experience of which Saint Bernard speaks. In Switzerland I became a writer; but – more importantly – I became a man.”¹²

All this suggests that a new direction¹³, a severing, a turning point occurred in the year 1930. It is no coincidence that Silone's personal records contain only documents from 1930 onwards, a manifestation of the clear break that Silone wanted with his past. Nor is it surprising that his literary activities started that year: “I had never considered writing until the age of 30.”¹⁴ “I had never realised I had this calling in me before then.”¹⁵ All Silone's literary works were written after this date and are a coherent expression of a man dedicated to portraying, in art as in politics, a vision of the world where liberty and human dignity rule supreme. Even his adoption of the pseudonym Ignazio Silone – with its civil and religious undertones – dates to that period and alludes to the birth of a new man.

Ignazio Silone

*“You can't talk about a living man as if he were damned,” protested Don Nicola.
“If it were true, we might as well close the churches and open a shop.”
“I've the impression,” he continued,
“that Rocco now faces a crossroads and that not only his future, but also his past, depends on which way he goes.
I mean, his decision will affect the sense of his whole life.”*



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Per l'unità socialista

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Benedikt Kautski

I poeti della Comune

Vittorio Libera

Come i socialisti olandesi hanno superato gli antagonismi ideologici:

Von der Goes van Naters

Gli inviti per Zurigo

Cultura

Marx in soffitta? di Mario Nigro; Un polemista della Terza Italia di Ottavio Fandelli; La teoria degli stati fisici di Renzo Vicario; Destino dei personaggi di Giovanni Gigliozzi.

Polemica

Libertà delle religioni di Walter Binni; Letterato contro i premi di Luigi Barlolini; L'"Unità", prende atto.

Questa Italia

Ignazio Silone: Perché la politica deve emanciparsi dalle ideologie

La parola ideologia sembra sia stata inventata da Destruitt de Tracy per designare il mondo delle idee. Karl Marx l'impiegò sempre in un senso strettamente peggiorativo. Molta stima quella parola non godè mai. Il malvezzo attuale di definire il marxismo come l'ideologia del proletariato, e le espressioni, ora largamente in voga, di ideologia socialista, comunista, democratica, e via di seguito, suonano perciò francamente equivoche; esse restano legittime solo per qualificare un modo di pensare astratto e vuoto. Ideologo vuol dire insomma uomo con la testa nelle nuvole: anima, a detta di Dante, « pasciuta di vento ».

Sarebbe temerario affermare che l'uso della parola « ideologia » per nominare l'insieme delle nozioni storiche sociologiche politiche che costituiscono il patrimonio spirituale socialista, o comunista, o democratico, sia sempre improprio e fuori posto. Effettivamente, sul campo politico delle sinistre fanno ancora bella mostra di sé palloni ideologici di dubbia utilità, se non addirittura dannosi, nella concreta lotta politica. È una ragguardevole quantità di concetti a noi tramandati dal secolo scorso, e che al loro apparire sembravano lumi eterni, adesso sono approssimativi luoghi comuni e, rispetto al progresso degli studi, spesso addirittura dogmi grossolani.

Nel campo del socialismo democratico il disagio, a questo riguardo, è meno gravoso che nelle correnti affini, appunto per la maggiore libertà di pensiero che notoriamente vi spira. Così, ad esempio, l'appartenenza al partito la-

burista inglese, come anche ai partiti socialisti scandinavi, svizzero, e ora perfino francese, comporta, oltre alla implicita adesione alla meta finalistica del socialismo, soltanto l'accettazione del programma politico formulato di volta in volta dai congressi e non implica affatto la professione di una determinata dottrina filosofica, e tanto meno una obbligatoria affermazione di ateismo. Così, tanto per specificare, nei menzionati partiti socialisti, accanto a molti aderenti marxisti, non mancano socialisti religiosi delle varie confessioni cristiane, altri di confessione israelitica, come pure studiosi positivisti, prammatisti, kantiani, e così via, mentre la maggioranza è indifferente, in quei paesi come altrove, ai problemi meta-economici e meta-politici.

Non c'è bisogno di molte parole per affermare il vantaggio di un tale costume. L'agnosticismo filosofico e religioso del partito non implica naturalmente, in nessun modo, un obbligatorio eclettismo dei soci; e cioè, in quei fortunati paesi civili, i socialisti marxisti, o cristiani, o kantiani, non sono affatto costretti ad essere marxisti, cristiani, kantiani tiepidi o impuri; ad essi si chiede soltanto un po' di tolleranza per i compagni di altra fede religiosa o di altra filosofia. Anzi, neppure la si chiede, tanto in quei fortunati paesi civili la tolleranza è naturale. L'unità, l'omogeneità, la compattezza del partito socialista si realizzano nella comune volontà politica.

Val la pena anche di osservare che la spregiudicatezza ideologica non ha mai messo in pericolo l'unità organizzativa

“How can that be?” asked the sister. “No one, I’ve always thought, can erase his past.”
 “He can do something that puts it in a new colour, a new light.”
 “So you believe that Rocco can still restore his good name? Save himself? Is that it?”
 “He’s reached the point where he can do something that will give his past life one meaning rather than another.”¹⁶

Switzerland granted Silone asylum for almost 15 years until the end of the Fascist regime, so that he ultimately regarded Switzerland as his “second patria.” The first few years of exile were hard. Not only did he suffer from tuberculosis (for which he was treated in Davos), but the young exile felt abandoned by all. Yet this was the period when he wrote *Fontamara*, the epic story about the *cafoni*, the peasants, the “last” of his native land. This novel, an international success, was published in 1933, first in German (like all his other works during exile) in Zurich, where he had settled and come into contact with numerous intellectuals and artists. He became involved in publishing, contributing to the journal *information* and Le Nuove Edizioni publishers in Capolago. In 1934 he published an essay on the origins and evolution of Fascism and in 1935 a collection of tales entitled *The Journey to Paris*. The following year he published the novel *Bread and Wine* (later changed to *Wine and Bread*), which was also warmly received by several important critics. This was the first novel in the trilogy based on Pietro Spina and partly inspired by autobiographical events. *The Seed Beneath the Snow* (1941) and the play *And He Did Hide Himself* (1944) followed, in which Silone outlined his system of values, recognising in the “rediscovery of the Christian heritage in the ferment of contemporary society’s liberation [...] our most important spiritual advantage.”¹⁷

In 1938 he published *The School for Dictators*, a satire aimed not only at Fascism, but all forms of totalitarianism. Intolerant of the coercive institutional and political structures, Silone spoke out sweepingly against the regimes of Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler. He saw communism as a species of “red Fascism.”

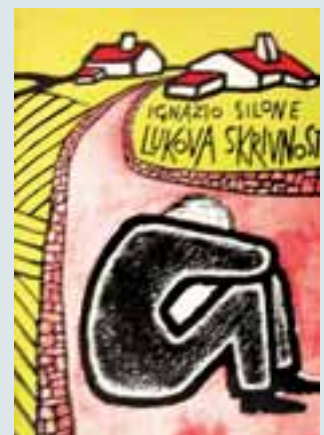
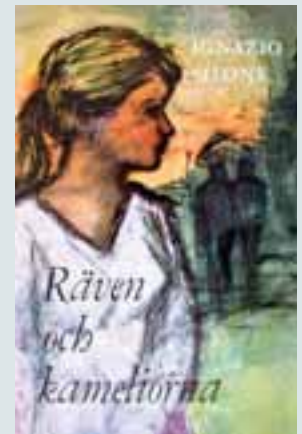
It was only in 1939, after a decade of abstention, that Silone returned to active politics,

despite Switzerland’s ban on political activities for refugees. He joined the Foreign Office of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and then became its leader in 1941. He also met the young Irish woman who was later to become his wife in 1939, Darina Laracy.

In 1942 he was arrested by the Swiss police for having printed and distributed anti-Fascist propaganda. He stayed in prison for only a few days, using the time to write his famous *Memoir from a Swiss Prison*, in which he said “[...] The impulse that has prevented us from capitulating before the dictatorship does not have its origin in classism, materialism or intellectualism, but is essentially ethical: upon it we must reconstruct the socialist movement; this necessity implies moving beyond our previous ideology and overcoming the cynical and sceptical nihilism so prevalent in today’s political life.”¹⁸ Silone returned to Italy in 1944.

In the post-war years he was a member of the Assemblée Costituente and a member of Parliament. Silone was overjoyed about the Republican’s victory over the Monarchists. He managed the left-wing paper *Avanti!* and then the *L’Europa Socialista* journal. He joined several socialist political committees, but in the end he opted to pursue an independent path. To underscore his independence, he referred to himself as “a socialist without a party, a Christian without a church.”¹⁹ He posed the question: “How many realise that the tyranny of means over the ends is the natural death of the noblest aims? And that the reduction of man to a tool and a raw material renders any claim to want to guarantee man’s happiness a sham?”²⁰ He opposed all forms of party politics, bureaucracy and machinations and stood out because of his anti-conformist positions. In 1945 he first proposed the idea of going beyond anti-Fascism, to adopt a pro-active *post-Fascism* stand open to dialogue: “The truth, today, can only be had through an exchange of ideas with those who think in a different way.”²¹ Silone retired from active politics in 1953.

In the meantime, he had published *A Handful of Blackberries* (1952), a decisively anti-communist novel that rekindled his old argument with Palmiro Togliatti. This work was a huge success abroad, but was ostracised by the Italian ideological critics, who raised



Left:
The covers of a few
editions of Silone's
works, translated into
all main languages.

issues linked with the author's life. As he took part in conferences and debates around the globe, Silone championed freedom of thought and developed close relationships with intellectuals such as Sartre and Weil. In 1956 he established the cultural magazine *Tempo presente*, which he managed until 1968. The same year saw the publication of his novel *The Secret of Luca*.

In 1960 Silone's only novel to be set in Switzerland and not Abruzzo, *The Fox and the Camellias*, came out. Five years later he published *Emergency Exit*, a sort of intellectual autobiography and perhaps his most important book. Then, in 1968, *The Story of a Humble Christian* was published, a work that met with great public and critical acclaim, even in Italy.

The birth of a new, aware man

*"[...] I would have loved to spend my life writing and rewriting the same old story, in the hope of, if nothing else, understanding it and letting others understand it – just as in the Middle Ages there were monks whose entire lives were devoted to painting the face of Christ over and over again, but in practice never ever painted it identically. It's now clear to me that I'm interested in a certain type of man, a kind of Christian, caught up in the workings of the world, and I couldn't now write on any other subject."*²²

Ignazio Silone was not a compulsive, automatic, methodical writer. He only wrote when (and because) he had something urgent to impart. The basic themes of his work are well-known: the fight against injustice and for freedom; the dignity of the most humble and persecuted; religious and sympathetic socialism; humble ground-roots Christianity; moral anti-Fascism; impatience with all forms of totalitarianism.

But what is the story that Silone keeps writing and revising in his novels? Who is that man and Christian that so interests him? One of the most recurrent themes in his narrative works is surely that of the "man at a crossroads": a person faced with having to make a radical choice, due to an issue of conscience, that inevitably calls for an extreme sacrifice. In *Fontamara* the protagonist is Berardo, a prisoner, who delivers himself up to torture and death after assuming guilt

that is not his: "If I betray [them], another hundred years will pass before a similar occasion presents itself again. And if I die? I'll be the first *cafone* that didn't die for himself, but for others."²³ In *Wine and Bread* – as in *And He Did Hide Himself*²⁴ – Murica regrets having betrayed his companions in the underground movement (having chickened out of suicide at the last moment) and so refuses to collaborate with the police, leading to his death in prison. In *The Seed Beneath the Snow* Faustina is unfairly dishonoured, whereas Pietro sacrifices himself for Infante. In *A Handful of Blackberries* it is Stella who suffers in expiation, though Don Nicola and Rocco also choose sacrifice to ease their conscience. In *The Secret of Luca* the innocent protagonist decides to suffer 40 years in prison rather than compromise the honour of his beloved. In *The Fox and the Camellias*, faced with having to choose between his role as a spy and his loyalty to Silvia (and anti-Fascist father), Cefalù commits suicide as the result of an existential crisis, the paradox being that his suicide redeems him. In *The Story of a Humble Christian*, in order not to compromise his own conscience and thus remain loyal to his concept of evangelical Christianity, Pier Celestino abdicates as Pope and suffers a series of "mortifications," which he accepts "without rancour, with thanks even, as an opportunity to practise humility."²⁵

The outcome of the various sacrifices made by Silone's characters is all too clear: "man arrives, through suffering, at an awareness of his own humanity."²⁶ The very act of sacrifice leads to deep awareness, of oneself or of others. Struck by Berardo's fate, the peasants of Fontamara become aware of their own rights and those of others and start to ask "What's to be done?" After attempting suicide and regaining his senses, Murica becomes the very subject of the phrase that so impressed him: "The person who finally attains full awareness of his own humanity."²⁷ The same is true of the prisoners who then witness his death in prison. In *The School for Dictators*, the exile Thomas the Cynic struggles "not for power, but for understanding,"²⁸ while in *The Seed Beneath the Snow* the meaning of expiatory suffering is probed: the spiritual meaning of the pain that is an integral part of the existence of

every human being. Ultimately, in *The Fox and the Camellias*, Cefalù's extreme act makes Daniele aware of the essential humanity of his "enemy," having witnessed the dramatic conclusion.

These themes of a turning point and increased awareness are paralleled in Silone's explicitly autobiographical works. Almost as if he were able to see into the future, in a letter to Don Orione in 1918, Tranquilli wrote: "I realised that my new faith [Marxism] would have led me unavoidably to suicide if it were to prove a delusion. I feared there would come a crossroads: I've reached it now, and I'm afraid."²⁹ A broader view of life and the value of life itself – this is the discovery made through suffering, experienced as self-sacrifice. In a letter to his brother Romolo, written while in prison, we read that, despite the suffering, "I'm happy to live and know now why I must live; yet once, if you remember, I didn't know what I was doing and what I should do in this world."³⁰ His *Emergency Exit*, when read carefully, illustrates a gradual process of increased awareness. "In the dark I reflected about what had happened to me; I knew that, with the passing years, I'd understand better."³¹ Again, "Our soul [...] now has dimensions sculpted by suffering that we couldn't imagine back in 1919."³² Driven by a deep "need to understand, to appreciate,"³³ Silone reconstructed his own course of human suffering. In this regard he frequently repeats something André Malraux once said: "It's a matter of transforming experience into awareness where at all possible."³⁴ Silone clearly indicates how one can attain this awareness: deny oneself, sacrifice oneself, never compromise one's principles to satisfy convention or the authorities. This is typical of an evangelical and Christological theory that transfers the knowledge deriving from the Crucifixion to human experience: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the Gospel will save it."³⁵ Don Benedetto, one of the characters in Silone's novels who is a true "figurae Christi," asks: "Can you imagine Christ plea bargaining with Pontius Pilate in order to avoid crucifixion?"³⁶

Silone is interested in the character who does not try to avoid a crisis, but actually welcomes it, if it leads to a discovery of values. Someone who goes beyond his own limits, who passes from a spiritual death to a true life, who becomes a new fully *aware* man. Not an individual, but a person-in-relation within a small non-conformist group. Silone's human(e)ism is aimed at abandoning ideology and creating an ideal community where life is grounded in shared values of liberty, genuine friendship and the communion of souls in the name of Christ: "Wherever we meet, He has promised to be with us."³⁷ The Christian community Silone envisages is a reality "where love replaces the law."³⁸ Indeed, he goes even further. In his writings and post-war politics, despite his own experience he goes against the current in an age of suspicion, mistrust, hypocrisy and betrayal by stressing the need for open dialogue where our common humanity can be discovered, even with our enemies. The man, the individual, is, he believes, more important than his political affiliations.

Confession and testimony

[...] There are forms of anguish that concentrate around us all the forces in our being, our vital energy, and are embedded in our souls like the backbone is in our body, like the threads in a woven cloth. Can we destroy these threads? Of course we can, but then the fabric is destroyed. "But, my son, can't you weave a less sad fabric with the same threads?" "What? Become another? That, too, is one way to die."³⁹

In order to understand Silone, we must appreciate the importance of this turning point in 1930. From that moment on he is, in all senses, a new man. Ignazio Silone is not Secondino Tranquilli. Certainly, the past cannot be simply wiped out and the writer would always carry the scars on his flesh and soul. But a man can also change, deeply, radically and completely – if we fail to understand this, we will never understand Silone. It is not a case of remaining true to oneself, but of becoming loyal to what is *good*. The author of *Fontamara*, *Wine and Bread* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow* is a man acting in

good faith. If we cannot bring ourselves to accept this, then we will never understand Silone, nor St. Paul, St. Augustine or St. Francis of Assisi. They all share the same dynamics of death and resurrection that are an intrinsic part of Christianity: “Yes, there are some established certainties. These, to my way of thinking, are Christian certainties. They seem to me to be so built into the human reality that they are almost one and the same thing. To deny these means disintegrating the man.”⁴⁰ Then again, if we look at the secular sphere in Silone’s day, there is no reason why we should not believe in Benedetto Croce’s anti-Fascist stance, taken in good faith, even if



he had friendly relations with the Fascist ideologist Giovanni Gentile up until the Matteotti murder. And what about those Italian post-war intellectuals, who were nearly all “last minute” anti-Fascists? Silone said “[...] the literati, the artists and the intellectuals have no reason to be proud of having played any disinterested, far-sighted or courageous part during the tragic decades just past. [...] events have, in any case, proved that profession of the arts and literature does not, *per se*, constitute a guarantee of morality and strength of character.”⁴¹

Ignazio Silone is Ignazio Silone from 1930 onwards. That date distinguishes all that was before from all that was after. So, even if we candidly admit what the scientific community has yet to acknowledge (i.e. that in the 1920s Silone acted ambiguously), can we really categorically condemn a person for

having stained his character through a crime in his past? If so, no man is saved.

Yet, we might ask, if Silone is an honest man, why did he never talk about this shady part of his life? Why did he hide this secret? Let’s try and answer this by putting ourselves in his shoes.

Silone’s crisis of conscience probably started in the latter part of the 1920s, perhaps at the time that Fascism clearly revealed itself to be a dictatorship, becoming indistinguishable from the bodies of the State. Psychologically it would be difficult to disentangle oneself from the contradictions of the time, to stop acting as an informer with all this entails and to disown one’s own past. In *Bread and Wine* we read: “Anyone who has had the misfortune to fall into this shameful trap [becoming an informer] is also condemned to wishing that the dictatorship continues for ever: he, at the bottom of his affronted heart, hates it to death, but also fears its fall ‘because then all will be known and I’ll be discovered.’ Thus he stays bound to his shame by the chain of fear.”⁴²

And after 1930? To confess at that time that he had compromised his integrity by collaborating with the Fascist police would undoubtedly have meant an attempt on his life by the communists. And that’s not all: he would have been hounded by the Fascist Secret Service, who would not have allowed him to leave the system (perhaps Bellone would have protected him in this sense). Can we condemn a man who, without causing anyone else further harm, tries to save his own life?

But why – we might ask – didn’t he admit to this in 1945, at the end of the war? Some 15 years had passed since the turning point in his life. Secondino Tranquilli no longer existed. Ignazio Silone was really a different person: a man who had distanced himself from all forms of totalitarianism, having spent fifteen years in exile, suffering untold hardships and staying true to his coherent yet awkward political beliefs. He had built up a network of anti-Fascist friends and collaborators. He had published books of a clear, incisive morality and still had many more to write for his readers and humanity itself: “I’d like to say two or three more things before I die, things that no one else can say and that destiny has charged me with saying.”⁴³

Silone at his typewriter in his home in Via Villa Ricotti, Rome.

To dig up the past would, most probably, have meant silencing the voice of free conscience, one that had already been ostracised by the opposing ideology.

Moreover, was he really obliged to confess? And to whom? The world at large or the people he had harmed? Or perhaps, given that he was a Catholic, to his spiritual father, as his character Murica did? And who says he didn't? What kind of inquisition is needed to prove this? Wouldn't that be dangerously slippery, pathological terrain to tread? What right do we have? "It would be puerile to confuse the truth with a thing simply laid bare."⁴⁴

Those who criticise his alleged duplicity should bear in mind that we do not know – and never will know with any certainty – what motivated Tranquilli to enter into correspondence with the OVRA officer. Weakness or having gambled too much? Had he been threatened, seduced or held to ransom? Was he aware that he was playing into the regime's hands or did he think he was honestly acting against Communism (red Fascism)? When did his conscience start to bother him, forcing him to put an end to this ambiguity? "No one will ever know"⁴⁵ what really went on in his mind, we are likely to say, just as he said in *Fontamara* regarding Berardo's salvation.

But then are we really sure he never confessed all? Silone could not undo the harm done or the grief felt; perhaps he continued to confess it obsessively and sincerely in his works. Perhaps all he did was to show us his conscience. In *Wine and Bread*, for instance, or the play *And He Did Hide Himself*, in the preface to which he wrote that the confessions bear witness to his own spiritual journey.

"There are bureaucratic, disciplinary confessions imposed by orthodoxy and then there are the free confessions of those who have conquered their own 'fear' In determining the origin and evolution of the facts of conscience, however, the chronology of memory is far more certain and trustworthy than the chronology of the archives. This [memory] recognises the interior links between facts that only appear to be isolated and distant, it brings them together and establishes the actual continuity of existence.

The distress I felt [in 1930...] was not the result of the action of abstract values, but

that of the more pressing and immediate psychological and political motives."⁴⁶

Silone's widow Darina has recently doubted the interpretation given to certain archive documents: "I'm beginning to realise [...] that the real document is a person's whole life. One needs to allow space, a wider sense of things, otherwise one runs the risk of losing grasp of what is more important, the truest thing, the sense of it all."⁴⁷

After all, in order to explain his own life, Silone constantly harks back to severing with the past when he was 30 and refers to his writings: "At that time I went into retreat (for the reasons that the readers of my most recent book *Bread and Wine* will know)."⁴⁸ It leads us to suppose that he keenly wanted the truth to come out. Not so much the truth about his life, but the universal truth that he felt within him, having survived an experience that marked him for life: "When a person has been to Hell and returns to the living," says Murica, "he has the absolute duty to speak about what he knows."⁴⁹

"My books have been the story of the uncertainties, the difficulties, the successes, of the victory of my soul in its struggle against all that was vulgar and merely instinctive in my earlier life. I don't believe that my books have any great literary value; I myself know, only too well, their formal defects. Their value is essentially that of human testimony; there are pages in those books that were written in blood. For my rebirth and resurrection (from the defeated man I was in 1930 on arrival in Switzerland to who I am and how I feel today), I am, in very large measure, indebted to Switzerland. [...] My last books, and especially *Bread and Wine*, *The School For Dictators* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow*, are the sincere expression of a man who remains radically opposed to Fascism and to every form of dictatorship, but for human and ideal reasons that transcend those of political anti-Fascism."⁵⁰

Not just the characters, therefore, but the writer himself is driven by a strong desire to understand and be understood:

"None [of the explanations provided by others] help at all in letting people understand the secret of the crisis that led me to leave the Party. I myself only realised this slowly, with difficulty, in the years that followed. And I have no difficulty in admitting that I

The "penna d'oro"
[Golden Quill] award
that Ignazio Silone
received from the
Presidency of the
Council of Ministers
in 1971.

still reflect on it, in order to understand things better. If I have written books, as I said, it's been to try and understand and let others understand."⁵¹ Hence the urgency he felt, the need to write, to communicate, to bear witness to the sense of our humanity. "It is not pleasant to write about oneself, one's mistakes, stupid acts, hysterics; it is not enjoyable to relive, even in memories, those nightmare years; and yet we have the duty to bear witness."⁵²

This is why Silone became a writer and, as such, mainly chose a particularly dramatic and absorbing form of narrative. Only the reader who accepts, feels and suffers with the characters takes part – together with the author – in an increase in awareness: "the story is a way to gain awareness, to evolve."⁵³

In a letter to the author Rainer Biemel dated 2nd September 1937, Silone again focuses on that year, 1930:

"Art has played a decisive role in my life. At the time I had virtually given up all desire to continue living. I experienced a grave crisis of conscience when I was 30, both physical and spiritual, and gave a brief summary of this in the first few chapters of *Bread and Wine*, when I describe Spina's disgust with politics. My crisis was far harder and lasted almost a year and a half. I carried it around inside me and with me to various health institutions and finally Davos, a place with which you are probably familiar through Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*. Since my life until then had been politics and I was at that point disgusted with it, I began to wonder what the point of living was. For a year and a half this question went round and round in my mind, every day and nearly every night. My entire being was sick and tired, like a man skin-

ning himself. Many a time my friends feared I was about to give it all up.

Fontamara, *Bread and Wine* and other works yet to be published cured me. It was difficult, but healthy, like a new birth [...].

The need for truth and sincerity that drove me away from party politics is the main stimulus that sustains me and my literary activities. Not only have I decided not to retract anything about my previous political non-conformism, but I believe I have delved deeper and am now able to give it a content that is irreconcilable, unshakable and uncompromising.

Artistic creation has been for me a great struggle where my spirit – freed from the earlier anguish, detached, released and no longer part of a confused, ambiguous world – has tried to put things in order and has created its own world: a world that's simple, clear and logical. A world conceived, but *true*, in any case truer than the real world we perceive, with the hidden, forbidden truth it manifests. [...]

I'm not concerned about proving anything with my work. But it's quite natural that by re-creating the world, my readers can learn about the truth that normal life strives to conceal. Only truth can increase our awareness, enrich it, strengthen it, free it. Only [truth] can affirm and defend human dignity against all that offends and holds it in contempt. Thus the true artist is always an educator, even against his will."⁵⁴

Conclusion

*"In every age and every society,
the supreme act of the soul is to give of oneself,
to lose oneself in order to find oneself.
One only has what one can give freely.
[...] Our love, our disposition for sacrifice and
self-abnegation are fruitful only if they are*





carried into relations with our fellows. Morality can live and flourish only in practical life. We are responsible also for others."⁵⁵

Perhaps some are disappointed because Silone was not "immaculate." And yet the writer from Pescina never boasted being this: "On my part, there has never been any presumption that I have followed the right way while others erred or slept. I, too, have done many foolish things."⁵⁶ Then again, he states that contradiction is, to a certain measure, intrinsic in human beings: "Man today is in a poor state. An image of modern man that is not too removed from actuality and that shuns hollow rhetoric can only be described as deformed, split, fragmentary; in a word, tragic."⁵⁷

Silone possessed integrity, not because he fell, but because he knew how to get up again and give value to his fall: "Do you think man can overcome his destiny? Yes, if he accepts it."⁵⁸ "And if my literary work has any sense when all is said and done, it's this: at a certain point the act of writing meant for me an absolute need to bear witness, the unavoidable need to free myself of an obsession, to affirm the sense and limits of a painful final break and more sincere fidelity. Writing has never been, and indeed could not be, a serene aesthetic pleasure for me, except in very rare moments, but is instead a painful and solitary continuation of a struggle [...]. And the difficulties I sometimes face in trying to express myself [...] arise [...] from a conscience that struggles to ease a few private and perhaps incurable wounds and that, in any case, stubbornly demands complete integrity. Because it's not enough to be sincere in order to be true."⁵⁹

Of course, when considering a man's life, we should never be too harsh or naïve. What we must remember is that any crime of duplicity, if such really happened, was committed during a period before Silone started writing and so has no effect – as his denigrators claim, and those who prejudicially allege that the documents found are not authentic – on the validity and credibility of the life and works of a writer who was *born* after this period. Indeed, although never justifying evil, a person who has been caught up in it and has managed to escape intact is a stronger and more reliable person than one who has

never experienced evil. Shouldn't we admire the person who – through a heroic gesture – escapes from hell in order to bear witness to that horror, with a sense of love for humanity, so that others may avoid it?

With regard to those who study Silone: in life as in the world of culture, real friends are not those who keep awkward secrets under wraps, but those who want the best for us and appreciate us despite such truths.

There is no doubt that Silone experienced a dark moment of the soul. If we read his works carefully, we understand that liberty, integrity and honour are not just innate or pre-acquired qualities for him, that may get lost along the way, but they are rather a victory in an arduous battle: "Man [...] is something we become."⁶⁰ Sandro Pertini, at the death of his friend, saw in him "a man with a pure heart and honest intellect." Igino Giordani, a writer and politician whose anti-Fascism is enriched with adamant Christian Christianity similar to Silone's in various ways, called him "an honourable man."⁶¹ Having said this, however, all that we know points to the fact that this purity of heart, rectitude and courage were, in Silone's case, a goal reached only after having completed a merciless and onerous journey, the outcome of which was far from certain: "Freedom is not a thing you can receive as a gift. I think that that is the most important victory of modern psychology."⁶²

How can we fail to recognise in Murica's words the similarity of his soul's path to that of Silone's?

"It may be, Pietro, that you were born whole, pure and thus also brave, by virtue of nature. My courage, on the other hand, if I may say I have any, is not natural; it is, as at this moment, the overcoming of fear; because my natural tendency is to be fearful and weak. Only recently have I begun to understand what courage really is, in the sense that you mean: courage seen as a deed of honesty.

[...] My confession [...], when no one yet suspected me, was a difficult, painful and supreme act of courage."⁶³

Even Pietro Spina – as though portraying the same character at a different stage of maturity – must have been through a similar experience in the past. Indeed, Silone says of him (although the words could

Left:
Silone in Rome in
1962.

Ignazio Silone (third from left, top row) during the laurea honoris causa ceremony at Yale University (13th June 1966).

equally apply to Silone himself) that: “Destiny has decreed that he should go underground and see everything from that viewpoint, so that appearances will not deceive him. He now sees that the things that the world venerates and adores are worth nothing and so he despises them, while those things the world scorns and abhors he recognises as the only true and real things.”⁶⁴ The point of view represented here is that of a grain of wheat that has to die in order to produce new life, Christ who becomes a “worm in the dirt” so that he can save us all. It may be seen as a real conversion: a conversion to the Truth, which inevitably coincides with Goodness and Beauty and which, for Silone, is also embodied in literature.

Owing to his own overwhelming thirst for moral integrity and his focus on the here and now, Silone was able to state with equanimity:

“[...] the past, with the deep wounds it has left in us, must not be used by us as a reason for weakness. We must not allow ourselves to become demoralised by guilt, sloth or nonsense, whether spoken or written. From the moment that our will is pure, a new force can arise in even the worst of us. *Etiam peccata*. This way of thinking may seem religious to some, and they are not entirely wrong. It is a word of which I am not ashamed, because it does not express a sentiment, but a form of awareness. I have already said on another occasion that I believe the rediscovery of the Christian faith [...] to be our most important spiritual advantage. I believe that this can also be perceived in *Bread and Wine* and *The Seed Beneath the Snow*.”⁶⁵

We cannot claim to understand Ignazio

Silone if we ignore the Christian perspective: that of the “sad nostalgia”⁶⁶ of the prodigal son and the return of the lost sheep: “[...] there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.”⁶⁷

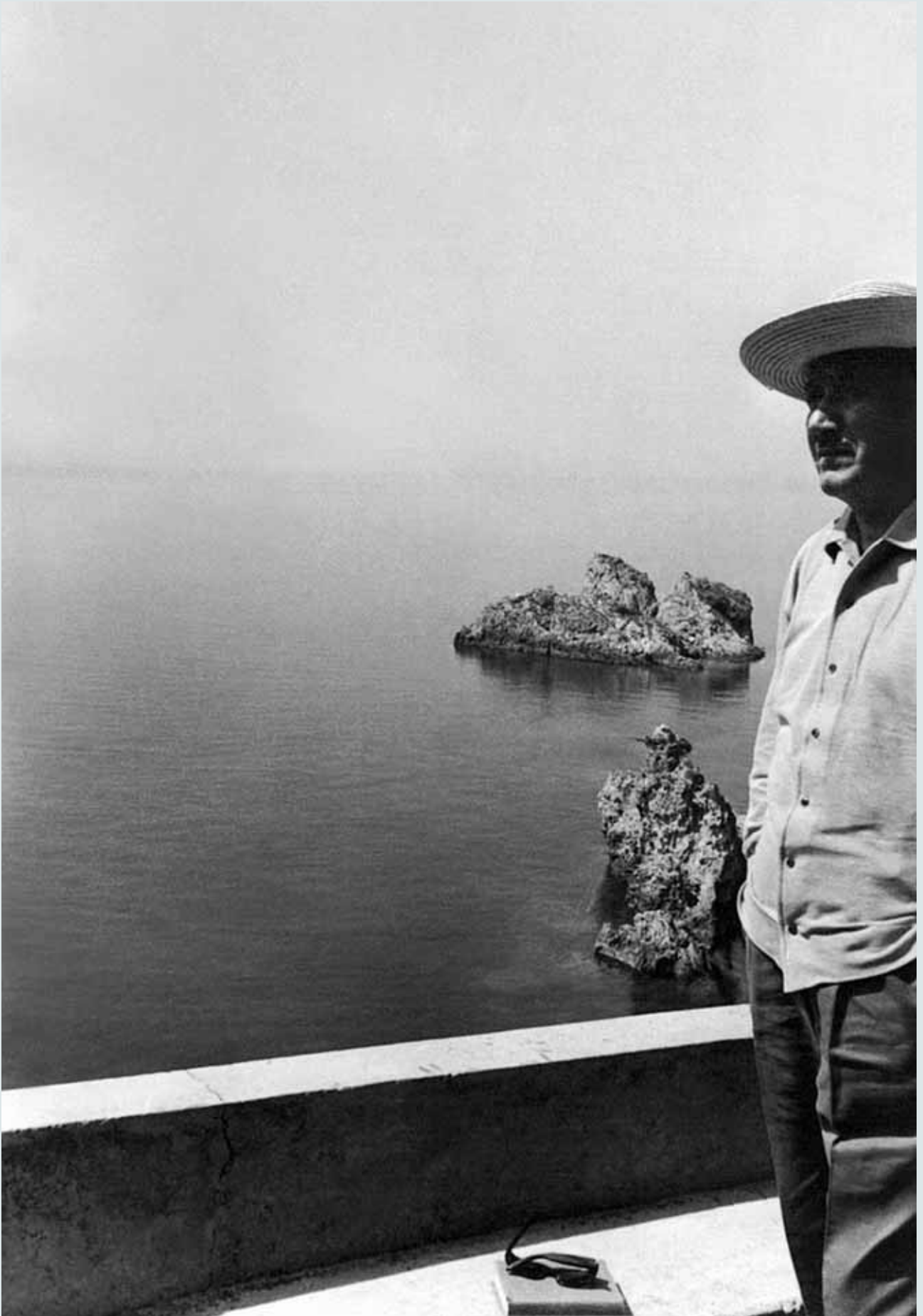
Despite his crisis of conscience – or rather because of this crisis, which he accepted and endured as an authentic spiritual and moral catharsis – Ignazio Silone’s work sums up the experience of a man who saved himself. And perhaps this is what causes the heart-strings of universal brotherly love to sound in all those who read him with a truly open heart and mind. Or are ready to free themselves to do so.

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- ⁶² Interview quoted in L. d'Eramo, *L'opera di Ignazio Silone* [The Works of Ignazio Silone], Milan, Mondadori, 1971, page 552.
- ⁶³ I. Silone, *Ed egli si nasconde* [And He Did Hide Himself], op. cit., page 85.
- ⁶⁴ I. Silone, *Il seme sotto la neve* [The Seed Beneath the Snow], op. cit., page 892.
- ⁶⁵ I. Silone, *Uscita di sicurezza* [Emergency Exit], op. cit., pages 869-870.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid*, page 871
- ⁶⁷ *Gospel According to Luke* 15:7.

