

Book Reviews

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Maurizio SERRA (2011) *Malaparte, vies et légendes*. Paris: Grasset.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci (1950: 169) wrote “Suckert’s dominant characteristic is a relentless *arrivisme*, an unbridled vanity and aameleon-like snobbery. To ensure he is successful, Suckert is capable of any kind of villainous act”. He went on: “His book *L’Italia Barbara* and his lauding of the Counter-Reformation contains nothing at all that is worthwhile ...”

A very harsh judgement and obviously somewhat casually made, but it should be taken into account that at that point Malaparte had not yet written his principle books. Nevertheless it remains doubtful that Gramsci, even if he had had the chance to read *Kaputt* and *The Skin*, would have provided a more favourable evaluation of their author, for, even if they were both friends of Piero Gobetti, their intellectual and moral worlds were too far apart. Still, Gramsci had at least understood one of the aspects – and not particularly one of the better ones – of the young writer. Yet on the other hand he was unaware of, or had ignored, many other features, which made up what Maurizio Serra has with a happy intuition called his “lives”. Indeed the writer Malaparte was, or tried to be, numerous characters at the same time: soldier, diplomat, trade unionist, man of action, politician, journalist, film director..., always, of course, in his own manner. That is why the task that Serra took on, that of writing several biographies at once of one and the same subject, was of almost insuperable difficulty. The fact that he has succeeded in it is due to Maurizio Serra’s being not only an elegant literary critic but also an established historian. In France and in Italy, among other achievements, his collaboration with François Fejtö (1999) on the history of the past century as well as his study of the ambassadorial appointment to Rome of André François-Poncet are well known. Another work, his *Fratelli separati*, was devoted to three French writers: Drieu la Rochelle, Aragon and Malraux, setting them in strict relation to their time-period and to the political ups and downs in which they participated so passionately on opposite sides. Serra has a particular fondness for those personalities who looked to play the lyre as much as to brandish the sword and whom he has labelled as “armed aesthetes”, an echo of what Machiavelli had said about armed (and disarmed) prophets.

In Serra’s book, all of Malaparte’s lives are examined and effectively dissected one by one, but the author never loses sight of the man as an overall whole. Malaparte’s adventure began in France where, at the age of 16, he went to fight in the Garibaldi Legion against the Germans, even though he himself was the son of a subject of Kaiser Wilhelm who had settled in Tuscany. It was already a way of affirming his identity and his taste for adventure. And that at a time when Italy was still a member of the Triple Alliance and would not enter the war against the Central Powers until a year later. When this occurred he engaged, still as a volunteer, in a unit of the *alpini* mountain troops, and was present at the disaster of Caporetto, a reverse which left a deep scar on the national psyche. It was then, with his first pamphlet notable for its provocative anti-conformism¹, that began two of his careers, whose developments were to be very different: those of literature and politics.

At first he gave the impression of wanting to put the first at the service of the second: it was not so much the pleasure of writing that inspired him as the wish to express ideas, original ones if possible, and even to impress opinion. In the confused and turbulent post-World War I period, when so many ideas were swirling about in Italy – socialism, communism, Wilsonian pacifism, fascism – Malaparte seems to have been prepared to accept, or at least to flirt with, all of them, provided that they were more or less in accord with the myth of the moment, that of revolution. He had thought this possible when, while still young and like Gobetti and Mussolini, he had been fascinated by revolutionary syndicalism of the type espoused by Georges Sorel.

The pseudonym that had been chosen several years before by Mussolini, “The Seeker” (but thenceforth *il duce* was no longer seeking anything, because he had already discovered the path of power), could well have been adopted by Malaparte himself. Between Gobetti, who had published his book *Italia barbara* through his little publishing house, and Mussolini, Malaparte finally lined up with the latter, who was in the process of coming out on top. Was this pure opportunism? Serra discusses this issue a number of times, for Malaparte’s choices in favour of winners would be repeated again quite frequently, not only in the political world but also the literary one, with his oscillations between the journals close to the *Strapaese* and *Stracittà* movements on the one hand and others that he himself founded, directed or collaborated with. His preference for the individual or party on the winning side or in the process of winning was linked to his desire, or his need, constantly to remain at the centre of current attention, if not of history. In relation to the latter he held an attitude that was to a certain extent contradictory. He despised it, while at the same time wanting to play in it the role, if not of the protagonist, at least that of a privileged witness. He wished to interpret the spirit of the times, while underneath sharing Goethe’s Faust’s opinion by which the *Zeitgeist* is nothing other than the “spirit of the learned men in which the times are reflected”². The biographer pursues, with an attentive and sometimes amused eye, his analyses of all the episodes of a human adventure which saw Malaparte pass from an extreme “left-wing” fascism via a sort of moderate contestation to his final socio-political stances which suggested something like a conversion to Maoism. No doubt he didn’t care if this was incoherent. It was to himself that he wished to be true, and he was. Can one therefore assert that he had no guiding direction, no ideal, no ideology that was often little other than a by-product? Serra does not and cannot give any clear answer. Certainly, Malaparte saw in the world civil and military violence universally triumphant (had he indeed not practised it himself?) along with the success of determined and vigorously acting minorities and the decadence of modern societies, but he did not condemn these developments while neither drawing from them any philosophy of history. Nothing was further from his thinking than Marxism in all its variants, in which the 20th century was so prolific. But neither did he believe in fascism and its claimed durability, to say nothing of liberalism and democracy, to which he quite simply paid no heed. His *Technique for a Coup d’Etat*, in which, drawing on the experiences of the first half of the 20th century, he wished to revisit and update the precepts of Machiavelli on how to win and retain power, showed that for him what counted was the asserted will of a few men (the *Catilinarians*), and not any supposedly scientific, economic, political or other theory.

While carefully following Malaparte through all the multiple positions he adopted, Serra never forgets the stage on which the spectacle unfolded. In this manner, he is able to bring clarity to many passages and correct manifold received notions that too often have become embedded and widespread, notably concerning the Italy of the first half of the last century. He provides in fact a genuine lesson in history, without excessive assertion but with perfect mastery.

A casual reader could well gain the impression that, since he wrote this book in France, the biographer devotes too much attention to the association Malaparte had with that country. The

fact remains that Malaparte was indeed very attached to France, which he considered almost as his second homeland. Even his choice of pseudonym, on giving up the overly Germanic Suckert, reflected this attachment, one which was often misunderstood and rarely rewarded. He lived in France several times: during the First World War and immediately afterward, in the 1930s and finally, after the Second World War. On each occasion the experience proved less than happy. In his final period of residence there, in particular, he was not on the same wavelength as the new Parisian intelligentsia, who did not appreciate him and whom he failed to understand. The plays that he wrote in French met with a very lukewarm reception, if not to say an unfavourable one. There was no doubt that he was disappointed by this and wounded in his self-esteem.

But meanwhile he had reached the peak of his art and his success with his two great works *Kaputt* and *The Skin*, which were to be followed by *Mamma marcia*, correctly identified as a metaphor of Europe. The same thing, however, could be said of the previous two books, to which Serra devotes pages of singular depth.

The secondary title of this biography refers also, and with good reason, to legends. What would Malaparte be without them? Generally speaking, legends are accounts which gradually mature in the popular imagination over a more or less long period of gestation, and slowly infiltrate the collective culture or sub-culture. In Malaparte's case, it was he himself who created them in order to defuse in advance or after the event the accusations he was addressed from all sides, but also to create for himself a basis for public acclaim, or quite simply from a spirit of invention. One has the clear impression that he ended up by believing the episodes that he declared he had lived, be it his "diplomatic career" which was no more than transitory and occasional, his participation in the "March on Rome" in October 1922 (a mere few weeks after joining the Fascist Party!), or further, the persecution he supposedly suffered for his claimed anti-fascism, including the five years (in reality less than two) of his imposed internal exile on islands not far from the Italian coast which are today holiday resorts, but which even then were scarcely gulags, or that at Forte dei Marmi, a centre of society life where all members of the political and social world who counted could be met. But still, why should one admire his inventions as a writer – and they were certainly numerous as well – and be critical of those that he concocted *pro domo sua*? Should not an artist be taken as he is, with both his genius and his weaknesses? This at least was what sincerely he was deeply convinced of ...

The chapter on Malaparte's politics constitutes something of an enigma. How could a man of such independent essence consider himself, and be considered, now as a republican – he had been an active member of that party when still young – now as a fascist, and yet also as being attracted by communism? How could he have written for newspapers like the ultra-fascist *La Conquista dello Stato*, which he in fact established and directed, but also for *Corriere della Sera*, for which he was the special envoy during Germany's war with the Soviet Union, and a short time later for the Italian Communist Party daily *L'Unità*, but yet also for *Il Tempo*, the organ of the conservative Right?

No aspect of Malaparte's personality has been ignored by Serra, whether it be his controversial relations with women, his egotism or his unadmitted complex with respect to D'Annunzio or younger writers like Alberto Moravia whom he nevertheless assisted and chose as a collaborator for one of his literary initiatives: the journal *Prospettive*.

The final period of Malaparte's life was perhaps the one that involved the most mystery. Serra identifies the phases of this period with his habitual precision, underlines their apparent contradictions and leaves to readers the task of drawing conclusions for themselves. That Malaparte should have travelled to the USSR at the invitation of its authorities is not particularly shocking, but how

could he, who had never been naïve and had always been proud of his critical spirit, write such banalities and untruths worthy of “fellow travellers” of the 1930s and 40s? Admittedly as a guest he would have to refrain from any overt criticism, but he was not obliged to sing the praises of the Soviets and their system, nor to dumbly repeat whatever their propaganda might be putting out. In China too he was dazzled by the marvels that he saw or thought he saw. “Where did the astringent verve of the noble Tuscan go?” Serra wonders almost incredulously. Though it should not be forgotten that Malaparte was very ill at the time and despite the treatments he received in China he had to return to Rome. It was there that the final act of his life was played out and where the final mystery occurred. Everybody wanted to be at his bed-side: both former and new friends as well as adversaries. Among those who were concerned over his state of health or the progress of his illness were those who would like to recruit him for their cause, like Togliatti, who brought him the membership card of the Italian Communist Party. His old comrades from the Republican Party of Prato did the same, and with more reason to do so. He accepted all such attention, whether out of courtesy or indifference. When you know that the end is near, you tend not to worry much about things and you don’t want to upset anybody.

Different politicians coming from other political horizons visited him, notably Amintore Fanfani. Serra sketches some very interesting portraits of this political world, which Malaparte had lambasted and which was now perhaps sincerely saddened by the imminent disappearance of the *Arcitaliano*, who had not yet reached his sixtieth birthday. Naturally there were priests and nuns of the clinic there to convert him. He had always been indifferent to religion, and besides, at his birth he was a Lutheran like his father. Did he experience a religious crisis? The priests and nuns declared that they had succeeded in their pious endeavour. That scene – the Communist and the Republican on one side, the priests (and perhaps the Christian-Democrats) on the other, is not unlike the episode in the *Divine Comedy*³ in which Saint Francis and one of the devils dispute the soul of the Franciscan Guido de Montefeltro, whose sin had been to give fraudulent advice to the pope Bonifacio VIII. In the end it was the devil who won out. For Malaparte we have no definite information...

On the other hand, we now know all about his “lives” thanks to this book of Maurizio Serra’s, about which one is unsure whether to admire more the meticulous documentation, the brilliant style, the always pertinent judgements or the concern to derive an understanding of a great but controversial writer, whom he presents sympathetically but without glossing over any of his weaknesses.

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Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. Curzio Suckert: “Viva Caporetto”, a title later changed to “La rivolta dei santi maledetti”.
2. W. Goethe, Faust, Erster Teil, “Nacht” 577–579: “Was ihr den Geist der Zeiten heißt,/Das ist im Grund der Herren eigner Geist,/In dem die Zeiten sich bespiegeln.”
3. Dante, “Inferno”, Canto XXVI, lines 68–111.

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