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INTRODUCTION TO PIERO BIGONGIARI'S GREEK WRITINGS

To be Italian in modern times has meant being haunted by disillusionment. Since the Enlightenment, writers and philosophers, Italian and not, have never stopped reminding Italy of the greatness of the early civilizations that flourished on its soil. There is nothing wrong with this, except that Italians themselves know it all too well. Their own marvelling is tinged with a feeling that by comparison those earlier civilizations put the modern Italian self to shame. This inadequacy in relating to history has been one of Italy's self-criticisms ever since Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) sublimated his own sense of failure into a national principle: the ancients were the youth of the world, whereas moderns, coming so late, are its old age, too degraded in spirit to live up to the ancient legacy. Italy's antiquity is also its tragedy, in that the country holds in its own hands the proof of what it once was but seems incapable of becoming once more. Moderns have slipped too far from the graceful Classical template, and have no equivalent systems to raise their spirits or words anywhere near their precedents. So much of modern Italian mental life has been about making do.

Foreign travellers to Italy have sensed this inadequacy too. Henry James, describing a visit to Capri, found that what uplifted him most, the knowledge that the place had figured in the minds of classical writers, could not in fact be described. The awareness of Capri's relevance was overpowering, but not even this most perceptive of writers felt equal to it. He sensed that he was too remote from the classical figures he had in mind, and that the only solution was to settle for second best, whatever that might be:

The grand air of it all was in one's very nostrils and seemed to come from sources too numerous and too complex to name. It was antiquity in solution, with every brown, mild figure, every note of the old speech, every tilt of the

great flask, every shadow cast by every classic fragment, adding its touch to the impression. [...] You had felt that often before, and all that could, at the most, help you now was that, more than ever yet, the present appeared to become again really classic, to sigh with strange elusive sounds of Virgil and Theocritus. Heaven only knows how little they would in truth have to say to it, but we yield to these visions as we must, and when the imagination fairly turns in its pain any soft name is good enough to soothe it.¹

In this place, the silence is double. Not only is James unable to articulate his impression of sharing its beauty with the ancients, so, too, he fears, the ancients would be unable to express their feelings to the modern visitor. The “little they would in truth have to say” is a measure of how wide the gulf yawns between world-views – and it is also a hint of embarrassment, the slightest allusion to the kind of profound shame that Leopardi felt and that lingers in much of Italian thinking, a sense that the modern world has added little to the ancient that the ancient has not transfigured already.

One reaction to this apparent lack of originality is to place the modern mind at the service of the ancient, in the hope that a fresh world-view may be achieved by osmosis. “Let the artist’s pencil, like the pen of Aristotle, be impregnated with reason,” wrote the revered antiquarian and progenitor of Neoclassicism, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, “that, after having satiated the eye, he may nourish the mind: and this he may obtain by allegory; investing, not hiding his ideas.”² Investing is not hiding, but neither is it being really oneself. In Winckelmann’s mind, the modern sensibility communes with the ancient by yielding to it, not by rising to it, so that fundamentally the sense of modern inadequacy remains. Classical models are magnificent, but the fact that there are models at all, and not inventions, returns the modern mind to wondering what it lacks compared to its ancient counterpart.

There is no suggestion of exactly what has so deeply changed, and neither therefore is there any notion of how to overcome the difference. The only certainties are the difference itself, which smoulders deeply and unavoidably, and the urgent desire to resolve it – except that, convinced of its own inadequacy, the modern mind can find no way to do so. So to reflect on Italy’s relationship to its own distant past is to embark on a vexed and even painful negotiation of futility.

What right is there to speak at all as a modern person? And can modern intelligence eliminate the barriers that have accumulated between itself and antiquity, to articulate how ancient intelligence experienced the world, and find solace in it?

In this and the next issue of *Modern Greek Studies*, I present a work by a modern Italian, the poet Piero Bigongiari (1914-1997), who came up with an answer to these questions. He did so not among the remains of Roman civilization, but its precursor in the Mediterranean, the civilization of Greece, the source of so many patterns and shapes that defined the culture of the Italian peninsula. From its foundation myths – the flight of Aeneas from Greek victory at Troy and his arrival on Italic shores – to its Imperial conquest of Greece itself, ancient Italy regarded Greece with the grudging admiration of a young rival: the fact that, prior to being melted down for recasting as weapons, Greek bronzes were copied by Roman sculptors into marble, speaks of the envy beneath so much Roman magnificence. Bigongiari did not share this motive. He was not interested in Greece as a justification for what happened in Italy afterwards. He wished to discover Greece *a priori*, as a presence in its own right, a reading of the Mediterranean world, including Italy, which had existed without Italian distortions. The searching, spontaneous way in which he formed his ideas reveals that it is indeed possible for modern Italians to transcend their divorce from ancient roots.

For Bigongiari the solution was to meet Greece on its own territory, reflecting on what happened within his own mind when he set foot in Greek lands or settlements. To experience the contours and arrangements of the sites of Greek cities, to breathe the same air and tread the same ground as ancient people, in effect to make the intellect dependent on the senses – by these means Bigongiari showed that it was possible to understand an ancient world-view simply by considering Greeks as people in a landscape, rather than as ideals. Ancient Greeks, like modern Italians, or people anywhere, had their dreams and their nightmares, their failings and follies, and had had to come to terms with the nature of the land on which they lived. Bigongiari's writings on these matters confirm that the preoccupation with living up to, or reliving, an ancient view of the world is in fact a fallacy – as indeed are the perceived disconnection of the ancient world-view from the modern, and the belief that there is nothing for the modern person to add to the vast array of ideas and feelings already expressed in the Mediterranean world. Of course it is impossible to see that world exactly as its

earlier inhabitants did, but that should not diminish either the attempt or the result, because the ancient imagination was as fragile and imperfect as the modern. Very little has, in fact, changed. The only difference is that the modern person has inevitably had contact with some aspect of the ancient, via their cultural inheritance. Yet as Bigongiari demonstrates, there is everything to be gained by treating this as an insight into fellow human beings, rather than as a burden of expectation. In the end, the ancient and modern figures standing in the same place, millennia apart, are each as consistent as a figment of the other's imagination, and just as enchanting.

Poets such as Bigongiari are used to travelling in time but it is rare to witness them travelling in space. Bigongiari's poetic idiom was the personal lyric but these travel pieces reveal that he was not solely introspective, a fact that is too often overlooked in critical appraisals of his work. He was an *ermetico* (*Hermetic*), so called (at first disparagingly) because his verse seemed to possess the attributes of the messenger god *Hermes trismegistus*, the link between mortals and the infinite, ineffable world of divinity. Bigongiari was among the principal figures of the third "generation" of this idiom, alongside Mario Luzi (1914-2005) and Alessandro Parronchi (1914-2007), who explored further the abstract ground opened by Giuseppe Ungaretti and Eugenio Montale. Montale is another *ermetico* whose views on ancient Greece deserve attention, and a translation of a short travelogue of his from 1962, *Sulla Via Sacra (On the Sacred Way)* will appear in the next issue of this journal, after the second part of Bigongiari's. Bigongiari and Montale shared the belief that ancient Greek culture was accessible to the modern mind, even though they made their journeys independently of each other, ten years apart, and were preoccupied with very different aspects of modern interrelations to ancient places: Bigongiari turned his attention to country people living among Greek ruins, while Montale spent a great deal of time complaining about hotels. A more detailed comparison of their views will be made in the next issue. What concerns us now is the nature of Bigongiari's piece on its own, since it is the longer and more original of the two, and represents a deeper shift in Bigongiari's world-view.

Greece in Italy is, as the title suggests, not a reflection on the actual country of Greece. Rather, it is about Magna Graecia, the areas of Sicily and southern Italy (Puglia, Calabria and Campania) colonised by peoples from Greece centuries

before the rise of Rome. Bigongiari travelled around Magna Graecia in 1952 and wrote these prose reflections during the journey. They represent a completely new beginning in his literary production. Bigongiari's first poetry collection, *La figlia di Babilonia* (*The daughter of Babylon*, 1942), is one of the most profoundly abstract by any *ermetico*, but the Second World War brought about a great change in his style. Bigongiari was trapped in Florence during its bloody liberation and suffered several years of melancholy afterwards, nearly giving up writing several times. He managed to keep his creativity alive by abandoning total abstraction and compelling his poetry to speak with greater emotional immediacy. In effect, Bigongiari taught himself to write poetry all over again, and to treat it as an opportunity to reflect on the psychological symbolism of contemporary experience, rather than a purely intellectual exercise. His second collection, *Rogo* (*Pyre* or *Blaze*) took eight painstaking years to complete (1944-1952) and its sixty-five poems reflect the tortuous but ultimately heartening process of readjusting to the world.

The prose reflections of *Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence* are the first writings to represent Bigongiari's forays into that world, free of the doubts of the 1940s. The suite is not entirely detached from *Rogo*, for the final two poems of that collection were inspired by the journey that *Greece in Italy* recounts. Their treatment of the dormant volcanic landscape of Campania concludes the work in an atmosphere very different from the grim, war-torn Florence in which it opened, and their references to Vesuvius connect the catastrophes of wartime with ideas of destruction already deeply embedded in the Italian consciousness. Yet in all other senses, *Greece in Italy* represents a major shift in Bigongiari's intellectual activities, and not only because its mood is infinitely happier. The suite marks a departure towards a subject that would fascinate Bigongiari for most of the 1950s and remain a source of inspiration for the rest of his life. He was searching for origins – cultural, existential, emotional, intellectual; the source of a human presence in a landscape; of an emotional and intelligent involvement with one's own culture; of the sense of being at home in a certain land; of the myths, fantasies, dreams and beliefs which had coloured the mental life in the earliest stages of memory. Memory, for Bigongiari, meant the intellectual inheritance of a civilisation as much as the recollection of one's own experience, and his major undertaking in the 1950s was a study of indebtedness to both. He wished to

comprehend the enormity of what gives a modern human being a past and an identity.

The yearning to rediscover personal origins had begun to preoccupy Bigongiari during the war. As a student he had moved to Florence from the all-too-quiet town of Pistoia, but after liberation in 1945, he realised that in leaving Pistoia he had abandoned his imaginative grounding. He revisited the town in 1947, and in a series of prose pieces in a similar vein to *Greece in Italy*, began to recover the mentality which had fuelled his imagination in the early years. First loves, nightmares, youthful daydreams, lost friends, vanished dramas, the buildings and hills which had not ceased to be there – although it lacked the sophistication of Florence, and despite all that had happened during the war, Pistoia retained all of Bigongiari's astonishment at merely existing. The town's renewed influence can be traced through all of his subsequent poetry collections. Most importantly, it is the quietly ecstatic central subject of *Le mura di Pistoia* (*The Walls of Pistoia*, 1955–1958), in which childhood, youth and middle age exist in the town together in all times at once.

A personal world still radiating with the awareness of its own infancy was also what Bigongiari perceived in the remnants of ancient cultures. The exploration of Magna Graecia described here was the prelude to two other trips which were larger in scale and in legacy. Bigongiari went to Greece proper in 1953, taking in Athens, Olympia, Delphi, the Peloponnese and many islands, and to Egypt in 1954, travelling up the Nile as far as the Second Cataract and visiting the Sinai Desert. On each trip he was accompanied by his wife Elena, who was a gifted photographer, the critic Giovanni Battista Angioletti, and Sergio Zavoli, who recorded Bigongiari and Angioletti reading their impressions *in situ* for later radio broadcasts with RAI. They were an intrepid and mutually inspiring group, and together produced two outstanding volumes of their photographs and prose reflections, *Testimone in Grecia* (*Witness in Greece*, Turin: Eri, 1954, reprinted Florence: Edizioni d'Arte Il Fiorino, 1971) and *Testimone in Egitto* (*Witness in Egypt*, Florence: Edizioni d'Arte Il Fiorino, 1958, reprinted Florence: Sansoni, 1985 minus Angioletti's writings). The memories of these travels, particularly in Egypt, had far-reaching influences on Bigongiari's poetry, even into his old age. More immediately in the 1950s, the themes of the journeys intertwined with Bigongiari's parallel reflection on his origins at Pistoia. His third poetry collection

Il corvo bianco (*The White Crow*, 1952-1954) was indelibly touched by the journey through Egypt. The title is a quotation from the writings of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, and after an intensifying to-ing and fro-ing between settings and associations, the volume culminates in a visionary blended image of a white crow in an eternal Tuscan spring.³ For Bigongiari the riches of personal memory and cultural meme were as one, subject to the alchemy of each human imagination.

The trip to Magna Graecia was a smaller venture and its effect on Bigongiari's writing is less evident. This was, after all, the first time he had attempted a project of this kind, and the astonishment arising from the later trips saw Magna Graecia left out of his poetry after the end of *Rogo*. The newness of *Greece in Italy* is also embodied in its form, since Bigongiari rarely wrote reflective prose works of this size. Apart from literary criticism, prose usually served as a testing ground for ideas later refined in poetry, and individual pieces were seldom longer than a few pages. It was not until 1985 that these sporadic prose pieces and short stories were collected into one volume, *Visibile invisibile* (*Visible invisible*, Florence: Sansoni, 1985), bringing *Greece in Italy* back into print for the first time since 1953.⁴

The years this prose suite spent in abeyance do not diminish the fact that it expresses Bigongiari's reconnection with ancient origins at its purest and most euphoric. The war had left him deeply troubled by the notion that a civilisation could vanish. In surveying the ancient colonial sites of Magna Graecia he was uplifted to realise how tenaciously a human culture could linger, importantly through surviving fragments of poetry and philosophy, but most touchingly through the reading of landscape that was implicit in Greek architecture, urban planning and myth-making. Bigongiari would be enthralled in deeper ways by his travels in Egypt and Greece proper, but nothing quite matches the radiance of his discovery that the Greek sensitivity for the shapes, atmosphere and detail of the Italian setting appealed to his own instincts, despite his being a modern person. In reflecting on the first stirrings of Western civilisation on Italian soil, *Greece in Italy* was itself the germ for Bigongiari's own grander adventures in knowledge.

Greece in Italy reveals much about Bigongiari's individual aesthetic, particularly in his ruminations on Orphism, the first religion to conceive of a union of reality with the ineffable, and a fundamental inspiration for Italian *ermetismo*. The suite also demonstrates Bigongiari's versatility in emotional evocation through the description of landscape. This was his first extended account of places outside

Tuscany, which had provided his habitual subject matter, and he rose to the occasion with remarkable grace. What the suite reveals about Magna Graecia itself should not be compared to the insights of a work of history or archaeology. Of course Bigongiari is indebted to both areas of scholarship, but only as a background to the desire to view the landscape in mythological and imaginative terms. In this respect Bigongiari accords with Henry James, who, despite his sense of inadequacy to what he was seeing, still instinctively looked upon ancient sites in a sensual way, witnessing “the ancient world [...] transformed from an immaterial, inaccessible fact of time into a matter of soils and surfaces.”⁵ What mattered was the impression of the moment itself and the associations that it happened to inspire then and there; there were no intrinsic demands on the intellect to think anything grand. It was the same for Montale on his trip to Greece proper in 1962. He appreciated that a different land required an alteration to familiar sensibility. “We Italians,” he wrote, “enjoy our landscape by the teaspoonful; while in Greece the measure is the gallon.”⁶ Such openness to new impressions of landscape seems to be more alive in the modern Italian mind than in the contemporary Greek, and indeed subliminally *Greece in Italy* and Montale’s shorter travelogue may suggest some telling lines of comparison between the two modern cultures.

Classicism, of course, has had repercussions throughout the Western world, including in modern Greece, but that is not at all the aesthetic or the guiding principle of *Greece in Italy*. Bigongiari approaches Magna Graecia – as he would later approach Greece proper – without the preconceived notions that Classicism implies. He wishes only to experience the Greek colonies, in their pioneering and wondrous negotiation of the Italian landscape, as settings innocent of their own historical importance; in effect, as dwelling places for the human spirit, an essential but fragile aspect of cultural history which a formal espousal of Classicism could easily extinguish. Such was the case with the only major Italian poet of the Twentieth Century to write successfully according to truly Classical principles, Salvatore Quasimodo, a Sicilian. Quasimodo unfortunately antagonised the abstraction that Bigongiari and his Florentine contemporaries pursued. Quasimodo announced his distaste in 1953, in his seminal *Discorso sulla poesia* (*Discourse on poetry*; see Salvatore Quasimodo, *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Gilberto Finzi, Turin: Mondadori, 1976, 285-295), in which he proclaimed that poetry should serve society as a kind of Greek chorus, commenting on political matters in epic, even

virile language. He also insisted that this new nobility of purpose would arise from Italy's south, drawing on the legacy of Classical culture that was spread around its coasts and dominated its heritage. History was kinder to Quasimodo than to Bigongiari – Quasimodo was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959, while Bigongiari, though he carried on writing contentedly, is now known to far fewer readers. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the new wave of southern “Classical” aesthetics that Quasimodo foretold did not actually materialise. In many ways Bigongiari's *Greece in Italy*, written only one year before Quasimodo's pronouncement, shows why.⁷ Quasimodo's plane of regard was too high and his idea of the passion of Magna Graecia was misplaced. His Sicily was a projection of personal myths, not an independent window on a legacy of mythology.⁸ For all his adoration for his native landscape, Quasimodo viewed it with a philosophically preconditioned eye and his idea of its destiny drew only on its glorified history, which was not the same as the mental life of the region itself.

Bigongiari's Magna Graecia is also a projection, but at least this arose from spontaneous observation and free association. In Bigongiari's eyes, the region glows with the limpidness of simply being itself; its human legacy does transcend time, but needs no encouragement to make its power felt. Merely to perceive such a legacy in oneself, standing in the places from which it originated, and realising that one's thoughts and actions call up their own past likenesses – these things are enough to feel ingrained in a larger endeavour, which will take its own shape without needing prophecy. Bigongiari observes the people still living alongside the remains of Magna Graecia with the same even-handedness, not passing judgement on their tough rural existence but perceiving many of its human realities as simple matters of fact. The “great silence” in which Greek culture interlaces with the deep Italian past is the immensity of an existence gradually evolving, not the void of a loss waiting to be evened. It is also a freedom from the insistent voices of modern Italian preconceptions. Bigongiari has silenced the “interference” of recent history and his own formation. Of course it his own travels he is narrating, but not once does he reflect on himself at length or on the final poems of *Rogo* that were forming by the time he reached Campania. The associations between volcanic landscapes and wartime destruction are kept separate from this travelogue. Rather, Bigongiari strove for a time not to think about modern Italy, and instead to look at the landscape in the way that a Greek might

have, setting foot in a strange country: unfamiliarly, curiously, fearfully, wonder-struck. In shutting out what he knew of Italy, Bigongiari was left with a “great silence” which he hoped would speak for itself.

The title *Greece in Italy* summarises in itself what I hope to achieve with this translation of selected passages. The suite can appeal to readers in both the Italian and Greek spheres of interest, both as a window on essential characteristics of a little-known Italian poet and as a refreshing depiction of a region of ancient Greek influence which has seldom featured in modern literature. More important than these is the sharing of intellectual territory: in Bigongiari's estimations, Greece interweaves with Italy through the investment of myth and emotion in landscape that establishes a human presence in a place. Magna Graecia as a geographical and political entity may once have been only an extension of the original Greek society, but Bigongiari makes it clear that the Greeks in Italy soon felt themselves to be an independent people, with their own relationship to the land in which they lived. What Bigongiari, as an Italian, gives back to Greece in this prose suite is a fresh sensitivity to the presence of its ancient self, in a place separate from the clouding of its modern history. In 1962, the same year as Montale, Greece was visited by another, very different intellectual traveller, Martin Heidegger. Heidegger asked in his travelogue, *Sojourns*, “Can Greece still ‘speak’ what is proper to it and claim us, the people of today, as listeners to its language[?]” The question is the same as that embodied by both Bigongiari and Montale's searching pieces. There will be more to say about the crossover and contrast of Heidegger's visit with Montale's in the next issue. For now, it suffices to say that ten years before either man set foot in Greece to pose the question, it had already been answered, by Bigongiari's *Greece in Italy*. Greece “speaks” to Bigongiari from the very first showings of worked stone beneath the soil. The paradox is that it speaks through silence: the silence of vanished preconceptions, of one person imagining what others might once have thought in the same place, the “great silence” in which time leaves the modern mind to conceive of past times by itself.

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The selection I have made reproduces more than two thirds of Bigongiari's original text and emphasises his presence as an observer and narrator. The parts I have

omitted comprise passages in which Bigongiari recounts history with less personal involvement than elsewhere, or when he quotes at length from the writings of historical figures, particularly Empedocles and Stesichorus, as well as Samuel Taylor Coleridge.¹⁰ Such quotations are interesting, but Bigongiari says little about them that adds to our understanding of him or his view of Magna Graecia. These prose pieces are travel notes, obviously seriously prepared, but still contingent on spontaneous encounters in the field. Most of the long quotations that Bigongiari includes reinforce his appreciation of a site or an idea, but they are not cohesively worked into his own reasoning. Readers can peruse the works of the aforementioned writers at their own leisure and achieve much the same impromptu effect. I have avoided omitting entire sections so as to preserve narrative integrity, but readers will notice the absence of sections II and VII. Omissions are marked by square brackets enclosing ellipses – [...] – while ellipses that appear alone are Bigongiari's. The selection presented here follows Bigongiari from Puglia down through Calabria and on to the east coast of Sicily, as far as Syracuse. Sections XI to XVII will appear in the next issue of this journal and will continue Bigongiari exploration of Sicily, with an epilogue in Campania.

The process of the translation was extraordinarily smooth. After the beleaguered poetry of *Rogo*, Bigongiari clearly relished a freer way of expressing himself. The arrangements and thrust of his sentences suggest the patterns of fresh thoughts unfolding. What is more, his diction is rich in semantic possibility, which actively invited the English language to work at its most elastic, while also seeking a tone which could do justice to Bigongiari's lucidity and elegance; there are distant echoes of Virgil. At some points in *Greece in Italy*, Bigongiari approaches quiet rapture at finding himself turning over the vastness of time in language that he can feel forming in his own mind. Elsewhere, there are repetitions and sudden stops, as might be expected in prose written while on the move. In all things, however, Bigongiari is sensitive to the sheer wonder at being in a certain place and moment, and to what the experience illuminates afresh in his body of knowledge. Any doubts regarding the English version of a paragraph or phrase were settled by measuring it against a mind that loved what it beheld.