

On Ignazio Silone's Bread and Wine, Albert Camus

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Editions Grasset has just given us an excellent translation of Ignazio Silone's novel Bread and Wine. Here, once again, is a work that deals with timely problems. But the mixture of anguish and detachment with which these problems are approached enables us to greet Bread and Wine as a great revolutionary work. We can do so for several reasons. First of all, the work is without any doubt an anti-Fascist's.

But the message it contains goes beyond anti-Fascism. For although its protagonist, a revolutionary who has spent years in exile after having escaped from a concentration camp, still finds reasons to hate Fascism when he returns to Italy, he also discovers reasons to doubt. Not his revolutionary faith, of course, but the way in which he has expressed it.

One of the book's key passages is certainly the moment when the hero, Pietro Sacca, sharing now the elemental life of Italian peasants, wonders whether the theories in which he has travestied his love for them have not simply put a greater distance between him and them. It is in this sense that the work is revolutionary.

For a revolutionary work is not one that glorifies victories and conquests, but one that brings to light the Revolution's most painful conflicts. The more painful the conflicts, the greater their effect. The militant too quickly convinced is to the true revolutionary what the bigot is to a mystic.

For the grandeur of a faith can be measured by the doubts it inspires. And no sincere militant, born among the people and determined to defend their dignity, could miss the doubt that sweeps over Pietro Sacca. The anguish that grips the Italian revolutionary is precisely what gives Silone's book its bitterness and somber brilliance.

On the other hand, there is no revolutionary work without artistic qualities. This may seem paradoxical. But I believe that if our time teaches us anything on this score, it is that a revolutionary art, if it is not to lapse into the basest forms of expression, cannot do without artistic importance. There is no happy medium between vulgar propaganda and creative inspiration, between what Malraux calls "the will to prove" and a work like Man's Fate.

Bread and Wine meets this test. Written by a rebel, it flows forward in the most classical of forms. Short sentences, a vision of the world both naïve and sophisticated, terse, natural dialogues give Silone's style a secret resonance that comes through even in translation. If the word poetry has a meaning, one finds it here, in tableaux of a rustic and eternal Italy, in cypress-planted slopes and an unequaled sky, and in the ancient gestures of Italian peasants.

To rediscover the road to these gestures and this truth, and to return from an abstract philosophy of the revolution to the bread and wine of simplicity, this is Ignazio Silone's itinerary and the lesson of his novel.

And no small part of its greatness is its ability to inspire us to rediscover, beyond the hatreds of today, the face of a proud and human people who remain our only hope for peace.

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