

*Umberto Silva*

**TURMAC  
BLEU**

*Un'autobiografia sognata*

ROMANZO  
BOMPIANI





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translated from the Italian  
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## IT'S ALWAYS THREE IN THE MORNING

I consider sleep to be a disturbance of the waking hours and I pinch myself in order not to do so. I wander around the house, I stop to look at the trees in the garden, I pick up one book, then another. The kitchen is the only safe harbour where I can find peace: milk, bread and honey assure me that the world is not filled only with cruelty. Until, that is, I notice that the honey jar is entirely empty. At that point I am overwhelmed by a note of ferocious disgust for the little being that lives within me: exploiting my distractedness and benevolence with no regard for cholesterol or tri-glycerides, that little darling has gulped down the lot.

I sit there in front of the empty jar, not knowing whether to feel sad because I ate it all or because there isn't any more. It is totally empty, obscenely so, and it doesn't even look like a honey jar but a container for that urine I'll be forced to check because of my bilirubin levels, a sinister-sounding word that brings to mind a small, multi-headed snake.

The hours go by but don't pass. "It's always three in the morning, day after day", wrote Francis Scott Fitzgerald, despairing. But this gives me hope, first because he said it, and secondly because three in the morning is the most beautiful time, and not just because of that sacred number, but because the abyss in which it occurs. If two o'clock belongs to the living who are about to let themselves go, and four o'clock shows signs of awakening (and is in any case a comfortable number), three is sunk into the unknown, it has no foothold, and no one will hear me no matter how much I scream. So, I open the window and there it is, always the same, that fatal city that comes to me from the dark garden, from the night: Milan, somewhere between the 1950s and 1960s, repeating the enigma to me at every corner: how was I able to do certain things, how was I even able to imagine them? I write in order to understand. This is a lie: I just want to swim in that past that, like every past, never passes, or rather, it passes then passes again in front of my eyes and ears while shouting: "The knife grinder is here, he grinds knives, scissors, dressmaker's shears, ham knives, women the knife grinder is here..."

## BOMBS AND TOY SOLDIERS

I was born in July 1943 in Val d'Intelvi, close to the Swiss border. Mamma had been taken there by her father, the Umberto after whom I was named. My grandfather wanted his daughter to be able to give birth safe

from the British bombers that would soon batter Milan. At the end of the war, my parents chose to live in a sumptuous villa in the midst of a linden forest, around 30 kilometres from Milan. I spent the first ten years of my life among those golden and tearful walls. Mamma was very young when I was born, she had married soon after leaving the *Istituto delle Orsoline* in Como, where she had studied. In the first year of her marriage, she had given birth to my older sister, who was followed by myself and two others. Most of my mother's relatives had taken vows. She certainly had no one to explain the ways of the world to her: her whims were innocent.

And she had plenty of reasons to cry, because Papà was a charming devil. Mamma never left her rooms in the villa, every so often she would come out to face the world, throwing herself into it for a few hours before turning on her heels. The governesses and maids loved me, but outside of our domestic life they were easy prey for astute tradesmen, of whom I was very jealous.

I still have a few photographs, some in the garden, of the four children. The youngest sits on the swing, surrounded by her sister and two older brothers. We push her, smiling. Marina is miniscule, she has a ribbon on her head, a lovely dress and short, chubby legs, her face lifted towards me. In a photograph taken a year later, she is older, wearing a dark jumper and a tartan skirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. My brother and I are holding her by the elbows to keep her in pose, but she turns. Marina prefers to appear as a slipstream of movement.

I began going to school very late, and did not know how to read or write throughout my entire childhood. My illiteracy was thanks to Papà, who himself was able to speak English, French and Spanish fluently, languages he had learned on long trips from which he would return thirsty for more trouble.

At the age of eight I was one of Napoleon's generals, in charge of an army of toy soldiers replete with cannons and trucks for the supplies. Napoleon was still very in vogue at the time; the film *Conquest*, featuring Charles Boyer, made him appear almost kind, almost human. It took me ten years to understand that my favourite historical figure was actually an imperial eagle who did not fly freely through the skies but preferred to pick at the tormented liver of Europe, his claws lacerating the flesh of Russian and Prussian youths, and that of many Africans. When the battle was over, the *Empereur* would go and inspect them on the battlefields. He observed their bodies, feeling proud if they had maintained a heroic pose, if the corpses in the throes of rigor mortis simulated passion, some fossil of enthusiasm.

Here I was, a child in the guise of a general! There were hussars on horseback in their extremely elegant uniforms, Prussian colonels with binoculars, captains on the ships' bridges, aeroplanes ready for take-off. The eras mixed together and that minestrone excited me intensely, it made me feel like the god of war. I would lay out the troops in the thicket of our great park. I would dig trenches, place snipers among the

rocks, the ships bobbing on the pond, the horsemen hiding behind trees, ready to burst into the open. It was a wonderful sight, but no one was looking. My brothers were at school, my little sister was with the nanny, Papà hadn't come back that night and Mamma was closed in her rooms.

So, I set fire to the thicket. The bushes burned whilst the trunks of the linden trees tried to resist the flames' attack. The soldiers fell, roasted, the ships blazed and I was absolutely mesmerised. As it ran along the hedge, the fire grew dangerously close to the house. The gardener wasn't there, it was the girl charged with washing the dishes who noticed. It was she who raised the alarm. I just swung on the swing with a smile on my lips.

"Idiot," she said to me, "you really are an idiot!" The firemen arrived.

When it was all over, like Napoleon I too went to inspect my battlefield. The water had caused more damage than the fire. Blackened and drenched, my soldiers were nothing but sludge. "Let's bury them" I suggested to the girl as she placed them in a basket. She didn't listen to me either and threw them into the bin. I admired her practicality: she was only 12 but she really did know it all.

She became my Josephine. I wrote her verses like "Your eyes are the dew of the world"; I gave her one of my mother's broaches, her eyes glistened, they really were the dew of the world. In exchange she

went on the swing without her underwear. And like Josephine, she was exiled from the kingdom. When the cook discovered that she was stealing all sorts, or rather, that I was stealing for her from the cupboards in our house, she was kicked out. That terrible day played a special role in my fate. The cook forced me to take her the rags and fifty lire pay she had left behind. We were to meet at the laundry, with its enormous tub and wet stone. She was hiding in there, a place where we would often hide to play. I was crying with shame, and she looked at me with a disdainful smile. It was my first real separation and that pain was the only thing that managed to inflame my cold, lizard-murdering heart. To the fifty lire given me by the cook I added everything I had in my pockets, then I took off my trousers and shirt and gave them to her, along with the leather belt, which was worth something. At that moment it seemed to me that the girl was a little surprised too, which she was, and she stopped crying for a while.

I started again, watching her leave by the gate. She was my playmate, my companion in adventures, in a vagabond freedom I had never before experienced. Hidden between the bushes we watched the sky, we ran together along the stream, we spent hours crouching down to observe the pine processionaries. I was left alone in that huge park, filled with fears. One day, I thought, I would see her mysterious black eyes once more. They would guide me out from the obsequious paths of this garden.



And Papà? Did I love him too? I've always loved Hell. Ever since I was tiny, I have held it close to my chest like the hot water bottle that warmed me and filled my sickly lungs with life. At night I tossed and turned in bed, boiling hot shivers running through my entire body. I dreamed of dancing devils wielding "the skittle", as our nanny Carolina called it, but Lucifer was there dancing around my bed in person: the father who had returned from his night-time jaunts and wanted to see the son who would have one day taken his place. The heels of his black moccasins tapped irrevocably, the crease in his trousers always perfect. During the day I wished for his death, at night I waited for his embrace that would drag me to the flames, to burn with him for all eternity. Of course, Hell is also known as Portofino, with its golden water.

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The seaside in July, Courmayeur in August, the villa on the banks of Lake Como in Moltrasio in September: this was our summer. For many years we went to the Bagni Nettuno in Rapallo until my parents bought a splendid house in Santa Margherita Ligure and employed a staff that seemed to grow by the day. Papà spent everything and wanted everything and, for Mamma, he was everything.

At Santa Margherita we used the *bagni* belonging to the Hotel Continental, the haunt of Milanese millionaires among whom Papà was himself included. His subtle beauty clashed with the corpulence of the *Commendatori* and *Cavalieri del lavoro*, whose young

lovers he deigned to seduce. He shouldn't have been surprised that one day these same men would plot his demise. None of us children were, we accepted our punishment. A tribal justice that afflicted the heirs, guilty of having admired their father's madness as he raced through the villas in his special edition car, levelling the flowerbeds, stripping the trees, spraying water from the ponds before plunging headfirst into the vegetable patches, spreading death and destruction. We laughed, nervous laughter, without daring to look each other in the face.

Santa Margherita was also time spent with my mother. I was often unwell and during my weeks of convalescence we would go to the sea, even in the winter – her, Marina, and me. At the seaside, Mamma seemed carefree. She laughed often, her beautiful face illuminated, and she played with me in the garden, kicking a red ball. Her skirt opened like petals over her slim, girlish legs, agile and free. She ran and shouted with joy when she scored. As ever, Marina did not speak much. She was blonde with round, blue eyes and our mother always dressed her in pink. She was eight years younger than me, and yet I liked to talk to her. She understood this, and she only spoke to me. During the summer, she spent as much time as she could in the water. When she was a girl, it was impossible to get her off the speedboat. Marina liked to paint and once, when we were at Santa Margherita, our older sister found us in her room smearing colours over our arms and told me off, because I was now fifteen

years old and should stop doing such silly things. But I loved having fun with Marina and she tried to imitate me in my adolescent desires to be an artist. My Santa Margherita is no longer there. But back then it still existed in its entirety. Pacelli still reigned in body and shadow, my family existed, the rich and the poor existed, the waitresses were real and as sacred as class struggle.

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It always rained in Milan, it's even raining now. I move the curtain and see the buildings immersed in darkness. In Paris you live, In Rome you fool yourself, in Milan you die day after day, with feeling. Back then, Milan was quite a romantic city where everyone worked, the knife grinders sharpened as if they were possessed and the milkmen were more aristocratic than a Russian prince. Every so often, when someone's grandfather or uncle died, the obituary tally in the *Corriere* was a more sacred rite than the funerals. The more you had, the faster you made it to Heaven, whilst the seamstresses with their watchful eyes reconstructed the cycle of love and hate in large families from the names that appeared in their mourning garb. Milan was a city of the extremely rich and of the poor, who were not really thus because they belonged to the Italian Communist Party. The proletariat was richer than the rich, "heirs of classical German philosophy" as Marx or Engels called them, I can't remember which. I think that

at that time, walking in the rain, eyes lowered to the pavement and *L'Unità* in my coat pocket, that was as much as I knew, because there was a great deal of work involved in distinguishing between the two: Marx was the embodiment of truth, the other somewhat more suspect given his birth. I was also suspicious, born to a family that, up until a certain point, had been opulent, and so I had to atone for my shady origins.

In 1962, I graduated from high school and decided to become a magistrate to strike terror in the heart of Uncle, the one heir who had managed to maintain and expand the boundless family inheritance, and so I enrolled in the Law department. In the meantime, the adored professor Lanteri had left the school. There were rumours that he had been kicked out by the priests for an affair with one of the mothers from 3B. He spent his days at the Jamaica, a dark cave where everyone smoked, a place of redemption and martyrdom. I want to visit him. With a wave of his beautiful hand, he invited me to sit at his table.

By that time, Papà had squandered almost everything. How? Why? It's impossible to say, there were so many ways. By way of therapy, so that I wouldn't follow his example, Uncle led me through the gambling dens of Milan. He was welcomed everywhere with great surprise and reverence. I looked at him askance. An impenetrable man, solemn, called by grandfather to help him with the business as soon as he finished school. Uncle showed no regard for the unkempt life of

adventure my father insisted on pursuing, but he envied his beauty. Papà had a tall forehead and an impulsive smile, his teeth and hair shined. He walked like Errol Flynn and winked not only at women, but also at trees, butterflies and rocks. Uncle had a wrinkled face like a bulldog, with graceless features. He didn't stand in my father's way, nor did he protect him from himself. He considered him a thorn in his side who would, sooner or later, cause him problems. He had been ready to resolve those problems for a long time now.

In one of those mysterious places where Uncle took me, I saw Papà. Bent over a table playing chemin, he didn't notice me, but I realised that in front of him was a single fiche worth ten thousand lire. Without being seen, Uncle stood behind him and slipped three older sisters, worth a million, next to that Cinderella. Papà stacked them on top of one another without turning around. We went back out into the night and Uncle winked at me: "Now you know who your father is."

I was already well aware, but seeing him at work gave me a strange sensation. Papà was reckless, but he was also a kind of hero who fought his battles on those tables, knowing from the outset that he would lose them. His hands were beautiful, virile and delicate at the same time, everything about him was mysterious and splendid. Not even Uncle's explanatory gesture had managed to deprive Papà of his unforgettable aura. I loved Papà and only hoped I would be worse than him.

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## THE DISORGANIC

I betrayed old friends in order to love them eternally. They did not understand, they went mad, they refused to give up. One evening at the Stork, Sandrone Piva tried for the umpteenth time to bring me back to the cause.

“Come on, *pirla*,” he said, inviting two women to the table. “I’ll tell you how things are and you back on it.”

The grand socio-economic theory that should have get back on it with communism and everything else was the following: there are those who have money, they love it and want more - they are on the right; those on the left have no money and want that of those who do. “So far, so clear”, Sandrone chuckled as he winked at me. Complicating things are the dickhead five percent who have money, but hate those like them who also have it, to the point that they would go to hell in order to take it away from them. Then, luckily, there is the fifty percent who haven’t got money but think that’s how it should be. Then there’s you. You’ve smelled gold and it’s always there on the tip of your nose, making it itch.”

I was very annoyed by the idea that oaf purported to know more than me about class struggle. No, my dear, I won’t get back on it. At dawn, I was on the telephone, waking comrade Grozzi of Ideology, a guy who spent the night next to the phone just waiting for questions like mine.

“I can’t deny that there is some good materialism in your friend’s discourse,” Grozzi declared, freezing my spine. “And dialectics. And if there isn’t dialectics, the discourse will get into trouble upstream, and downstream you’ll be collecting it with the dustbin of History.”

That night I was out like a light, but, for the first time in my life, I began to be visited in my sleep by the Shadows. The first was that of a newspaper seller who died in my last year with the Jesuits. We construct our careers for death in life: they are the words we say, the looks, the gestures. No doubt that newspaper seller who I would see *whistling in profile* on my way to work hadn’t been studying to be a ghost, he wasn’t planning his career as a Shadow. And yet, it was he who appeared before me.

My first crisis of conscience began with a fever, like when I was a child. One evening I felt it rise up with imperious speed, in bursts of heat, and I wobbled to the attic. I climbed into bed covered with sweat and anxiety. Under the sheets, shaking all over, immersed in a phantasmagoria of newspaper sellers, maids, priests, soviet sheep, motorboats and commissars, I finally got to thinking.

Was my political activism right? I could see that it was ridiculous to get angry with churches, because they have no soul. Whether good or evil, a soul belongs to an individual, many of whom are particularly attracted by the idea of going to church. There, they can hope to strengthen their private “religions”, their rites, their obsessions.

This is why it is necessary to differentiate between the Inquisitors of God and the People's Commissars. How can one be scandalised that so many illiterate people kneel before the baroque follies of the Church when we, the erudite, the super-graduates, venerated Mao and his Little Red Book after having discussed it at a meeting? Humans rarely dare to think, most of the time they merely limit themselves to envy, deride, hate, sentiments that we collect under the verb "believe", wrongly judging it to be more noble. What did we believe when we believed we believed in the party, in science, in the homeland, in the end justifying the means, in virtues, in the courtesy, in love, in progress, in regression, in mosquito nets, in the Devil, in God? Who knows? The more ostentatious they are, the more these dogmas appear to cover others that we make an effort to cultivate in swamps set deep in foggy territory. There, we feed carnivorous flowers with our enormous souls. Their malevolent exhalations inebriate us, so that in order to protect them, we send overtly foolish prejudices, dogmas that are arrogant even in their diction, false targets and pilot balloons to the front line to face the insults and ridicule. The iron-clad faith in the Great Beyond, for example, can mask even more iron-clad fantasies of eternal death, which in turn cover what? Any return to the first thought is in vain, the movement is never-ending. Personal profit throws you off the scent and cancels out your tracks. So, why get bogged down by rationalists and be so hard on beliefs, accusing them of being lies to be exposed? They aren't true or false, they reveal a secret thought that is difficult to admit.



Once usurped, the thought does not disappear but makes itself heard, stridently so, through the guerrilla warfare of lapsus and forgetting, an incessant work that causes cracks in the defensive walls, a fever that lasted days and forced everyone, Mamma, my adored siblings and even Papà to present themselves at my sick bed. It grew, the fever grew.

I awaited death as a sign that there was method in creation, something serious, something just. The real rich and the real poor spoke to one another, they had so much to say to one another about life, love, death, they got together and found me out. They knew I wasn't one of them, they had always known it, they had only accepted me to see how far this imposter would dare to push himself. It was the same old story. But he, *il Piva*, bested death, finally arriving with aspirin and a roast chicken. He offered me an appropriate salary as long as we went out to raise hell together every night.

I only left the Party after several years. We know that, in 1958, *il Migliore* had begged the Soviets to wait before hanging Nagy as there were elections in Italy. We know that *il Migliore* has asked the Czechoslovakians to wait until after the Italian elections before announcing Slánský and Co's return to the fold. I was a terrible Communist, but perhaps being disorganic to everything, including myself, stopped me from getting comfortable in a lie of success.

A few years ago in Rome, after at least three or four lives, I saw the professor again, as well as the People's Commissar, Lanteri. I thought that the Party was, for

him, only a second or third stage in a spectacularly adventurous existence, but instead he had stopped there. Suddenly, in piazza Montecitorio I found myself surrounded by people with cowbells and flags of every kind. Lanteri was the only one waving a modest red flag. He saw and recognised me. He pointed his fingers at me, as if they were a gun, before slowly bringing them to his own temple and bursting into macabre laughter. I had loved him, at the beginning. And I still loved him a bit now, at the end.

## ROMA IN BLUE

I made a more permanent move to Rome in June 1967. One day, from a fifth-floor terrace of a building in piazza Rondanini, I recognised Jean-Paul Sartre by the unmistakably sparse hair on his head, as he ate lunch below with Simone de Beauvoir. I could not believe my eyes. I rushed down, interrupting him as he wolfed down his *saltimbocca*, and I managed to get him to agree to an interview that afternoon in bar Giolitti. He looked upon me favourably when I revealed that I didn't write for any newspaper, that I actually didn't write at all. I thought he wouldn't come, but instead, entirely punctual, he turned up, still a little sleepy. I felt sorry for him. My first thought was: poor thing, he must be really hard up to have to waste his time like this. Why was Sartre coming to me? Was he so desperate for company and youth?

It all seemed too easy: the Legend was there, at my mercy. In the torrid summer afternoon, we chatted about lots of fairly senseless things, whilst I stared at his small head, fascinated. When he was talking, I listened distractedly. I had thumbed through some of his work and vaguely disliked it. Every so often I inserted myself into his discourse, working in some eccentric theory that he patiently attempted to be open to; sometimes he even nodded. When it came to the litmus test – whether he preferred Godard or Truffaut – the *ancient gauchiste* answered ‘Godard’ without hesitation. I smiled sarcastically. He knew, the old fox, that this was the answer most in keeping with the Ideology. If by some strange fate he had preferred Truffaut, he would never have admitted it. After an hour or so, I couldn’t bear it any longer, I thought about the girl waiting for me at a different bar, but also that I would have loved to smash that little head in with a bottle of mineral water. Would he have defended himself, clawing and roaring like the old lion Trotsky?

I certainly had absurd fantasies. Murdering Sartre, and while he was still digesting! And why? Would it be a philosophical crime like Lafcadio or a mere psychopathic impulse? Or because Sartre had showed a generosity that had always seemed too much to men of no consequence: to listen to me, to speak to me? Dear philosopher, may your Shadow forgive me.

In those years, I spent all my time reading essays, such as *The Destruction of Reason* by Lukács or early structuralist writing, when only two decades earlier

Ciocan had written the *Précis de décomposition*. That is what I should have been reading! Perhaps I wouldn't have become a nihilist. I would have been able to think about the Nothingness, to turn it into many coloured tiny smears, instead of keeping it intact in the credenza. To think about it is to love it, yes, even the Nothingness, it is the only way for it to become Something. So, when you detect the acrid odour of desires that went up in smoke, wait before taking refuge in the white dusts of sleep, wait and breathe in the evaporated hopes, breathe in the smoke of desires that are now torments, exhale, inhale. Both so very distant in time, the great ball of the counts of D. will seem like nothing in comparison to a desolate osteria with dirty tablecloths and three washed-out customers of an evening. At the ball you were only in love, while at the osteria you despair.

I lived in a minuscule two room apartment between via della Chiesa Nuova and via dei Banchi Vecchi, which I had decorated with blue furniture. I had even painted the walls and the ceiling blue, and bought blue dishes. It was a house with no sunlight, and if it did enter it was absorbed by the blue. That colour was important, though I can't remember why. It's like that for so many things in Rome. I remember very little from that long period, other than snippets or waves that immediately retreat. Only much-loved faces reappear to me, faces that have now, for the most part, become Shadows. A strange fog sits over those years, over everything I did, and when I try to think back to that time, to extract details from the smoke, I find myself in a state not unlike a dream.

Cinema, the cinema called me. I had passed the entrance exam for the direction class at Rome's *Centro sperimentale di Cinematografia*. Roberto Rossellini was the *commissario straordinario*. Here's one, a much-loved face. For Rossellini, a simple "Action" had always been enough. This is what I adored about him: the absoluteness, the decisiveness, the nonchalance. I fixated, hypnotised, on the knot of his tie and the expert way in which he tied his scarf, and I thought that I would never knot my tie. He liked me, even though I was arrogant. I belonged to a community of young people who met to worship the artform, our only god. I wrote for *Filmcritica*, I was often with the others at the Filmstudio in via d'Orti d'Alibert. It was there that for the first time I saw the films by Straub and Huillet, and Warhol's experiments. We were incredibly strict. In the impassioned indulgence of our critical intransigence, I boasted about being the most ferocious of all.

Spring 1968 saw the occupation of the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*. During the various assemblies, Bernardo Bertolucci turned up. He was filming *Partner*, an exasperated, romantic and feverishly deconstructed film in which Pierre Clémenti plays a professor at a theatre school in Rome grappling with a merciless doppelgänger. Bernardo believed the European intellectual was structurally incapable of Revolution: only a doppelgänger would have been able to take theatre to the streets.

I played one of the students who finally betray Clémenti by not attending the final lesson, the appointment with the Revolution. Tina Aumont, who I loved, was in the cast. She walked, or rather swayed in her funny way, through the ruins of Mercati di Traiano as she waited for the filming to end. In the film's most famous scene, the doppelgänger stands before the drama students to teach them how to make a Molotov cocktail in the style of Majakovski. At the weekends, Pierre flew to Paris, where the students' protests were taking place, and he came back to us with the glorious slogans he had heard along the boulevards: "Liberate Expression", "Steal your happiness!".

There is a short interview of mine from that time, in which, with tight lips and head bowed, without looking at the camera, I whisper: "If a man of theatre, at this time, is not doing political theatre but that of a particular politics, that is, if he is not a political man but a man of a particular politics, he is not a man, he is not person of theatre, he is nothing."

In one of the film's final scenes, Pierre, looking for his deserter students, followed my character, who shared my name and was wearing a suit and an elegant hat, as if I were dressed up as my father. He called me, but I pretended not to hear him. I threw away my cigarette with an air of impatience and got in a taxi that whisked me off, whilst Pierre stood in the street shouting, "Umberto, Umberto! What's going on? Umberto! What is going on?"

Who would have known how to answer him anyway?

After getting my diploma, I made my first film, *Come ti chiami amore mio* (*What's Your Name, My Love?*) It was full of sloth and gaiety, a true folly. Years later, Callisto Cosulich wrote that he hadn't been able to watch it, but that by what he had heard, it must have been an extreme radicalisation of the 1968 protests, a film against those very producers who had allowed it to be made just to make a little money, because it was unusable. He was probably right. The truth is that, save the sacred formal concerns, I cannot remember a single thing about what it was I was trying to say at that time. I remember infinite rivers of militant criticism on the long wave radio station *Tel Quel*. I only know that everything I created was dedicated to my most faithful companion, the advancing Nothingness. The invisible film, *Come ti chiami amore mio*, was seen and appreciated, however, by a young art historian and feminist essayist who wanted to meet me: Elisabetta. I was captured by her intelligence. Dark hair framed her unusual features, which told the story of her family's movements throughout the Mediterranean. I immediately understood that she knew far more about love than I did, love and what could be built from it. I asked her to marry me. And we got married, in December 1970.

Only my siblings came to the wedding. I didn't invite Papà or Mamma. I didn't want to see them, perhaps in that moment I didn't want to ever see them again.

In the civic hall where the ceremony was held, Marina stumbled. She was calm, but seemed uninterested in making any conversation, her only concern was staring at the sky or ceiling as if in a daze.

Elisabetta and I moved into an old house off piazza delle Coppelle, a maze of rooms and corridors that looked over roofs and terraces. If you looked out of the window over the courtyard, you could see Natalia Ginzburg opposite, watering her geraniums.

I continued to be active in the Party, despite the struggles I was facing. When I wasn't talking about politics, literature or cinema, I was silent. Elisabetta didn't even attempt to get me to talk about anything else; maybe this bothered her, but she let it go. In any case, we were always involved in something or with someone.

The *Avanguardia* was much more useful to me than I was to it. It was present, pure, permanent, it was in itself a cancellation of the past, of memory, of myself. *Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui*.

Here, other faces return to the surface, including the first I grew close to: the artists Franco Angeli and Mario Schifano. Franco was just eight years older than me and had long offered himself up to his *cupio dissolvi*, but I was too silly to really understand the cause of his pain. I thought self-destruction had nothing to do with me, me who would have razed pretty much everyone to the ground. I couldn't understand Franco, but I felt his caress, his great sweetness. One day I gave him one of my books and, in exchange, he painted an aquila



stellate there and then, and dedicated it to me. For me, cinema and writing, life itself, had, all things considered, remained an infernal game of ping-pong, me against everyone else, me against Papà, Engels against Marx, Papà against Hegel, me and Freud against Papà, and so on, whilst for Franco, painting was a holiday from death, which remained his companion forever.

Elisabetta and I liked to go to the parties Franco and Marina Lante della Rovere held in a huge villa on the Appian way. It was at one of these, among the ever-multiplying feet and the whirling of dresses, that I met perhaps the dearest face. Immersed among the others, it was as if he had a brilliance capable of climbing over the sound of heels, the clinking of glasses, the smack of kisses and the shouts of partygoers in order to reach me, no matter where I was. It was the brilliance of Alberto Moravia, accompanied by Goffredo Parise, who when he sat at a table, always held that beautiful, heroic face in his hands, almost as if he were able to plunge into the waters of his lagoon like a heron's beak.

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I admired his audacity: disease, Africa, brilliant women, the tricks of enemies and friendly fire, solitude and boredom. He wasn't afraid of anything. At the time, that level of dominion caused me great bewilderment and I tried to imitate it, clumsily throwing myself into ill-advised endeavours. Once, he stopped me, squeezing

one of my arms between his knotty fingers. It was a grip that would not allow for any rebellion: he, usually so indulgent, asserted an absolute authority at certain moments. Though unrestrained in his desires, he knew when to stop. He wanted to keep me safe from harm, he didn't think I was yet equipped for such descents into the underworld. I don't remember what he said, but that grip is forever tattooed on my skin.

With interviewers and biographers, Moravia contracted into a boring respectability, repeating that which he most hated. He was suspicious of fans and thought that by lobotomising himself, he would satisfy their inane expectations. His greatness was expressed in private, in deeply private, confidential moments, and consisted of capturing with absolute clarity each person's truth. When we became friends, I immediately thought of using him to extract perfidious revelations or contemptuous judgments on other members of his court. One morning, at the Caffè Rosati, I asked him what he really thought of the artistic qualities of his most faithful friend, Enzo Siciliano. He remained silent. I watched him furtively and realised that he was thinking. When Moravia was thinking, his eyes would fix on anything. After a few minutes and a plate of crisps, with a tone that would brook no response, he replied, or rather he passed sentence: "Enzo Siciliano is Enzo Siciliano".

We went back to speaking about women.

I don't know if he was driven by social prudence or metaphysical audacity, but my money is on the second

hypothesis. After a pause, he said, “Roberto Rossellini is Roberto Rossellini.” Then he looked at me with a stern frown. In those two minutes he had truly penetrated the cosmos of the great director, he had scrutinised every star and had re-emerged with those enchanted words. This, I thought, is a true critic, one who uses the works of others to flaunt their own intelligence, insisting on illuminating the text and glorifying the author, to torment them with refined guile before then leaving them in some car park of history or literary habit.

It was initially difficult for me to admit it. I put him to the test, I attempted dirty tricks. “La Palice is La Palice”, he cut me off the time I tried to belittle him by asking him to pass comment on the French mercenary. With that supreme phrase, Moravia showed himself to be infinitely superior to the master, just like when, smiling, he tore a hat from one of his pupils the day after that student proposed writing an immense book composed of all the words in the dictionary.

“Borges is Borges,” he said. “Moravia is Moravia.” And here he hesitated, for what I believe was the first time. His eyes clouded over and he murmured: “Even if, as a child, Moravia was Alberto Pincherle.” In his daily hell he had given himself a place of regard, the flaming tomb of Farinata degli Uberti, of the genius of those “who with the body make the spirit die”. Only he could find hell on the Eden-like Capri, that hell he would invoke even where it was not. Raffaele La Capria, a much-beloved friend with whom I bonded later, lent his ear to Moravia’s involuntary humour

with extreme finesse. He told me of a holiday they took in Amalfi, with Ilaria and Dacia fishing for sea urchins underwater. With a furrowed brow, Moravia smashed the sea urchins and devoured their insides, whilst looking out at the blindingly blue sky in which not even the smallest, most innocuous cloud could be seen. After a while he asked La Capria: “What’s the weather doing? Is it going to break?”

“Why should it? It’s entirely calm”, La Capria asked him with half a laugh.

“Because things happen when you least expect them”

“So, should we always be on the alert?”

“Yep,” Moravia concluded drily.

# Umberto Silva Turmac Bleu

EDITED BY MARTA BARONE

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*Family ties, Rome in the Sixties, loving and letting go: a charming novel built on short stories told in exquisitely spare literary prose by an eclectic filmmaker and analyst.*

Umberto Silva is one of a kind. As beautiful as an actor (and he was an actor in his youth), an art historian, a director, a critic, a screenwriter, he involved all of his friends (among which Moravia and Raffaele La Capria) in his movie projects. The Roman milieu was at the time the liveliest ever, brimming with creative energy and intellectual engagement: the right place to thrive for a Renaissance man such as Umberto Silva. Who then steered to psychoanalysis and made another job of it. *Turmac Bleu* collects the best of his literary writing, originally scattered in short stories and poetry collections: the young, talented Marta Barone, author of the much acclaimed *Sunken City*, worked closely with him in order to build up from his writings the novel of his life.

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**UMBERTO SILVA** Born in 1943 in Northern Italy, as a young man he settled in Rome where he worked as a reviewer, actor, director and filmmaker, taking part in the brilliant cultural life of the city. Then he devoted his life to psychoanalysis. He now lives in Padova.

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