

Lettori

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The smeller of books

It would be obvious to assume that, of the five senses, readers would exercise sight the most.

Wrong, smell wins out. Content matters little for some readers: the decision to buy seems to be dominated by how the book smells.

They will open a book (near the middle), stick their nose in it and breath a long deep breath, their eyelids flapping like the wings of a hummingbird drinking nectar. This phenomenon is most likely the result of the prolific production of books titled after perfumes: from lemon leaves, to midnight rose, to lavender bread, to rain in the Balkans, to flowers in Iraq, and red apples, and lies, and chocolate, and blood, and coffee, and ice, and meringue, and cinnamon, and love, and thyme, and forbidden spices, and the devil, and ginger, just to name a few. This overstimulation of the sense of smell, an ad hoc marketing find, will inevitably cause readers to turn into noses and books, we suspect, will be sold in elegant bottles.

The pick up

The statistics have spoken: if you have a hundred readers, seventy will be women and only thirty will be men. And most of the thirty are simply hoping to hit on one or more of the seventy. Here's how it works. After a brief stake-out the man learns that women tend to go to the bookshop over the weekend. The man then begins a week-long mating ritual. Over the first three days he observes his prey and secretly buys all the same books. He dedicates Monday to Thursday to voracious reading, going so fast that his understanding of the material can't help but be limited. When Friday comes around he stalks the bookshop, spots his victim, sidles up to her and starts a casual conversation about the books. The woman is stunned by the coincidence (what better way to begin an amorous adventure...) and is immediately willing to chat. The man wastes no time asking her out for drinks. They end up in bed. The next day, he steps out of the shower and pushes his luck quipping, "I just love *The Leopard*, by Calvino, have you read it?" She gets dressed as fast as she can and runs away. They will never meet again.

The imaginary reader

We are all potential imaginary readers, so long as we know how to read and, above all, have a bank account. Many writers will, in fact, take a blank piece of paper, close one eye and, peering through telescopic sights, put their imaginary reader in the crosshairs before pulling the trigger. "Who's going to read my book?" they ask out loud. But the real question is, "Who's going to buy my book?" As soon as they spot the imaginary reader: Bang! Bang! They fire their narrative bullet, and sometimes even hit their target. Now, as Giorgio Manganelli would say, all writers are secretly convinced that God reads their books; however, since He doesn't have a wallet, that's not enough. So they lower their sights and aim at poor innocent readers in flesh and blood.

The sovereign reader

There's a particular species of reader, known as the sovereign. Most specimens are female (the male is quite rare): snooty individuals, who love to prey on male booksellers, especially the gentle ones.

As soon as she enters the bookshop the sovereign draws attention to herself with a sound similar to the call of a peacock. She always wants help finding her books, so she can let everyone know what she's reading. Her greatest thrill is catching a bookseller who doesn't know his books. She pulls back a rebellious curl, clears her voice, and dreams she's sipping champagne in Montmartre. Only then does she whisper the title impatiently.



The obsessive reader

There are some readers, silent and bespectacled, who run along the rows of books with the eagerness of a truffle-hunter. They never ask for help, and booksellers love them. These readers always have a mental list of books - they often memorize the entire catalogue for their favourite publisher - and fly past the shiny new titles to find the book they want.

Buying books is part of their daily routine. They pick up an armload of books, which they buy at once, and show up half an hour later to buy two or three more. You will often see them outside a bookshop at dusk, kicking an empty can and cursing under their breath.

Totally lost

Even the person who reads just one book a year, or has only ever read one book, is technically a reader. When these poor souls wander into a library, they immediately realize that they are not in their natural habitat, and they lower their heads in shame. They will lift their eyes, ever so briefly, hoping to catch a glimpse of some interesting title, or beautiful cover art. May as well, since they're there. True readers look down on them. Merciful booksellers will let them wander aimlessly about, the less magnanimous will hover around them like vultures parading authors with difficult names: Szymborska, Coetzee, and so on. "Curse them" the neophyte mutters, "may blindness seize them all!" And runs away.

Reading while driving

These readers are a blessing on the whole of humanity. By slowing traffic, they reduce the number of driving accidents and spare those furry bundles of blood and guts so often found flattened against the asphalt. Time seems to fly for the driver as the pages run slowly and the trip ends all too soon. The clutch and the brakes last far more than usual. And yet, unlike the use of mobile phones while driving, this habit is barely tolerated by the other drivers on the road, who spew blasphemous rage as they're forced to slow down. A word of advice for beginners: start where there are no bends in the road.

The absent-minded reader

The sale of books has recently become a ubiquitous practice. Post offices, drug stores, rest stops, supermarkets, shoe shops, hardware stores and greenhouses all sell books. Of course, some would say, we have more readers these days, and they have less time to go all the way to a bookshop. Humbug, sirs! Readers are a species on the verge of extinction. The few who are left are lost and confused, and will often stumble into bookshops asking for an aspirin or a lottery ticket, or end up in a pharmacy looking for Moravia amid the suppositories.

Picking a fight

There's a reader who tunnels his way into waiting rooms of any sort: be it the dentist's or the doctor's, or an airport, or train station. He loves to be part of the ritual of waiting, and will ring at any doorbell that says "John Doe Dentist" or "So and so, Attorney at Law". He makes his way up and sits to wait for his turn, which never comes. The reader opens a book he always has on him (by some unknown author only he knows about, who's barely missed a Nobel more than once) then casually glances at what his neighbours are reading. He groans, raises an eyebrow, sighs and mumbles: "So that's what people are reading these days, booklets and magazines, and they call that literature? It's all junk!"

"How dare you?" someone bites back. Should a fight start, the irritable reader always gets the worst of it.

The forgetful reader

Dogs are not man's best friends, books are! And this reader knows it well. Books don't leave hair around the house, don't lick you after sniffing at another book's back cover, don't hug the table humping an imaginary first edition, and so on. But, most importantly, books don't have microchips and can be abandoned at any rest stop along the highway. They can be abandoned anywhere, on the blow dryer in the toilette or on the gas pump, and there's no penalty. There's no need to feel heartbroken, both will find new friends.

At the cafeteria

Some readers would rather spend their free time taking a walk with their dog, or their girlfriend, or polishing their car. But when they end up trapped in a conversation at the barber's or on the internet they're shocked to find that they are not in the know, and have nothing to say.

So it is that they buy this or that book that someone else mentioned and flip through it on Sunday. Their mind starts to wander, so they read the first chapter and something from the middle of the book before skipping to the end. At lunch they talk over the issue with their girlfriend, who shares a quick overview of two or three bestsellers. When someone finally asks for their opinion on the book, they answer: "Very well written, a real page turner, loses a little near the middle, but then really gets you. Though I was surprised with the ending". If they're totally unprepared, they state reassuringly: "I haven't read the book yet, but I saw the movie!"

On those special Sundays, when the urge to take a walk is too great to resist, they memorize the author's name and the title: sometimes that's all you need.



Shadows

Few people are willing to admit that they never read. We should applaud their courage. There are many, however, who boast about having read two or three books each month, though they've never even cracked them open. They will often quote at least one sentence from each book: you'll find it in quotes on the inner jacket.

Press them to tell you something more about the most recent book they've read, and they'll find a sudden interest in their fingernails before abruptly changing the subject. Why it is we feel compelled to lie about what we've read, even more than about whom we've loved, is a mystery that has yet to be solved.

Truffles

Some readers are fascinated with rare books that have long been out of print and can spot a first edition of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* with their eyes closed. Their wallets are empty, their clothes are in tatters, they eat only what they need and spend every last penny on old books.

Their heads have been buried in books for so long that neck pain is a part of life and the mouldy pages of long forgotten books inevitably leads to fits of asthma as well. Piles of books clutter their homes. The only contact these hermit-like individuals have with humanity is through the hairs and the eyelashes and the crusty bits of skin previous readers, now long-dead, have left in their books.

The writer

Readers are increasingly prone to jump the fence and try their luck as authors. The first step is to put on airs, as any good author would do, to the point that their fellow readers no longer recognize them and they end up shunned from sushi night.

"Who cares," they say to themselves, "if that's the way they want it. Besides, solitude is the secret to good writing". They become enthralled with full moons and raging storms and sunrises and sunsets.

They stop reading, to avoid being influenced by other authors, then get into vicious fights with their wives and their children. A tormented life, they believe is a necessary qualifier for any author worth his salt. They quit their day job and hope that misery will draw out the memorable words that will one day bring fame and wealth. A cat is the next obvious step, Hemingway had one. The stage is set, and the former reader can begin. But the story always ends the same way, they pester their former friends to read their great work, and their wives find lovers.

Go ahead, try and warn them, before it's too late; the reader turned writer has sealed his fate.

The dandy

Of the many species of readers, one is most unusual. He has no interest in the title, nor the author, nor the words contained within. Linguistic style, genre or period mean nothing to him. All that matters is that the book be brand new and elegant; burn the used books and those that sell them. He turns his head to avoid the sight of a pocket-sized edition and tosses any book that's earmarked.

Books should be seen and not read. They should be immune to humidity and the pages must never turn yellow (paper might easily be replaced with sheet metal for all he cares).

He replaces any book that appears worn.

The author's name and the title of each book eventually sink into his brain as he shuffles hundreds of books with meticulous care. Books are not arranged in alphabetical order, but by height and, above all, by colour, just one more element of interior design. So it is that Honoré de Balzac is placed beside a recipe book, and Giacomo Leopardi rubs shoulders with a vintage car catalogue.

The book fetish

Some readers are obsessed with signing their books, the way a dog marks his territory. You will inevitably find their full name a city and a date inside the front cover, or at the very least their initials. Their bookshelves are incredibly well organized and dusted every day, but the books are arranged by such personal criteria that even an expert librarian will have a hard time finding Dante's *Divine Comedy* without reading through every single title. One shelf will be filled with books read over the summer; another will date to those two weeks of chicken pox, and so on.

Such readers will talk to their books the way one talks to one's plants or to the pictures of the dead. Just looking at a particular shelf will bring back memories and tears. The books are regarded as precious children, never to be lent to anyone, not even a friend. What's more, the neighbours are never allowed inside the house, lest they should get a glimpse of the bookshelves when they pop over to borrow some eggs.

Authors

Even an author can be a reader, but of an altogether different kind. He takes a casual stroll through bookshop and moves his own books into a more favourable position, then leaves.

He reads the great classics and praises them loudly, so long as the author is dead and no longer poses a threat. "Ah, that vivid image painted by Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*... you could just smell Father Zosima's rotting corpse. Can you name an author who could do that today? There is none!" he says out loud.

Though in his heart he thinks, "except me".

When it comes to his peers, he always has something negative to say. Especially if they've been somewhat successful.

He would be happy to die and remain dead for a year or two, long enough to become famous and see his books sell, so long as he could come back from the dead and take up writing once again, as soon as he realizes he's been forgotten.

By the seaside

Those who bring their books to the beach are the true saints among readers. They suffer through every impediment: children screaming, mothers scolding, volleyballs, Frisbees and soccer balls, wind, water and the burning hot sun. They can't help but read, otherwise they would find other distractions, like building sand castles or playing water games. More often than not, they are forced to read with one eye closed, shielding themselves from the glare of the sun on the waves: but strained eyesight and headaches are not enough to dissuade these intrepid readers. Nor are they snobs, they will read anything, though mysteries and novels are definite favourites. The book itself doesn't receive any special privileges: it may be earmarked, ripped, or stained with suntan lotion or greasy fingers. The reader will sometimes fall asleep while reading. If a dung beetle comes within site after he or she wakes up the mind will wander to poor Gregor Samsa from Kafka's

The Metamorphosis and pity the poor creature, who used to be a man.

Ultimate reader

This individual has given his whole life over to books. How many books, no one can say, life and reading are one and the same, a lonely curse. He's never made any friends, nor loved anybody. He has no family. Skin and bones reveal his measly diet, and deep dark bags hang under his eyes. His voice is a distant memory, dried up like a branch of rosemary. Those who know him are certain he was born a mute. When he meets people he stares straight down at his toes and shakes and wells up with tears.

He's amazed how many things people have to talk about.

There's no telephone, nor television in his house, and he never answers the door. Life beyond books is unbearable, he's always out of place. Everyone bullied him as a child, but never once did he fight back.

Time seems to have come to a standstill: and the man looked just as old when he was fifty as he does now that he's eighty. He reads his books under a ten-watt light bulb and keeps the blinds closed, so nobody will know he's home. He believes in metempsychosis and hopes to one day be free from books, transmigrating into a bat since, as we all know, you can't read with radar.

The spiritual reader

The number of people reading books by spiritual guides is skyrocketing. The trend is most likely due to the shock created by the financial crisis and by Isis.

This new, enlightened reader dresses in comfortable clothes, and often carries a "dream-catcher" around. He's fixated with indoctrinating and healing the ordinary reader. He spots one, studies him and then draws near. The reader tries to back away, but he's trapped.

Then the homily begins: "Good morning! Be happy! Find the true essence of life!"

At times he will leave a business card claiming to be a Love Coach, Life Coach or Tantra Master. He may even extend an invitation to one of his teachings, for a mere hundred euros.

What water won't wash

GALLUCCI

A washerwoman for stories

“I am a washerwoman. I wash clothes here in town for those who have enough money to pay me and not wash clothes themselves. My sunny shop is the washing area by the river, with beds of stone that were set by men and smoothed by women and years and years of clothes. My shaded shop is the town washhouse, with its rows and rows of sinks, with its cast iron roof and its ornamental curls, and a woman at each basin. My small and cosy shop is the one beside the main street, with its steam and the incessant flow of running water.

I wash and I wash, and knead my bread out of water. My hands never rest and my mouth keeps them company as it talks and it sings.

Wash water wash – the truth from lies is bought

Fire will not cleanse it, if water can not

Burn fire burn – No memory is lost

What fire will not purify, a story will wash

Washerwomen, as you know, use their hands and their mouths: they sing and they talk, they spread rumours and facts, slanders and sins, and secrets and lies. But only some of them know stories. They wash clothes with their hands until they become clean, and wash facts with their mouths until they become stories.

Some sell sickles and hoes, and tools of the trade; others earn degrees, take up arms, open bars in large cities; some make cheeses from rennet and milk, others curdle the truth with lies and make stories.

Every trade has losses and gains; the grass will be green whenever it rains. In every trade there are gains and losses; green grasses grow on well-watered plains”.

1 A tale about soap

“I was washing by the river one day. Washing the clothes of a wealthy family. You know the type, with a son who was a surgeon in Cagliari, and another a monsignor on the continent. Valuable clothes, expensive, laces and napkins and waistcoats.

The sun was singing in the sky, inviting me to leave the water and give him something to dry. The water sang back as it ran along the river, spinning and dancing and splashing here and there.

I had the company of three other women, one blossoming, one ripe and one withered.

“The clothes seem to be washing themselves,” the young woman sang with the cheer of a lover’s song in her ears, “The river is doing all the work”.

“I’ll do the work myself,” said the other, “I won’t have a river stealing my job!”

The ripe woman said it was young hands that made the work easy. Youth makes any burden bearable, even the senseless ritual of using elbow grease to wash what the body’s grease will soil, and wash and soil and so on forever.

The old woman stated matter-of-factly that they were washing the monsignor’s laundry. Heaven knew and blessed the water with holy soap.

I laughed. All three were right, and I asked them if they knew the story of Zizi Sabonète. The young woman didn’t and cheered me on; the second said she knew it, but didn’t understand why it had anything to do with the river; the old woman said I should watch my words and fear God and his ministers. She knew the tale, it seemed, but not the whole of it, and not the shiny version it had become over the years of washing it and rinsing it. So, since the young woman was eager to hear it, and the ripe woman was silent and attentive, and the old woman, well... her lips were pursed, but she was listening, I began.

Many years ago, long enough that a girl wouldn’t remember, but not so long that an old woman would forget, a boy lived in our town, a special boy, who had the brains of a goldfish. Francesco was his given name, but everyone in town called him Zizi:

Zizi Sabonète. He was short and stocky, in good health and good company, but not very bright. His mind had settled on the age of three and made a home for itself there: “mentally retarded” the schoolteachers said it was called.

He lived, or rather slept, in a dark shack made of mud and straw out on the edge of town, with a lonely old woman, herself made of mud, who was said to be a witch. No one ever learned whether she had found that child who knows where, or made him herself, who knows how. The woman could barely provide for herself and she was more than happy to let her boy wander around town all day and come home after dusk well fed, and clothed, and washed and smelling like a mountain lily.

Everyone in town knew him, laughed at him, asked him questions, eager to hear his unlikely answers, and loved to see him act like a madman. But for all their mockery, they welcomed him, fed him and protected him.

They laughed and were happy. They gave him gifts, and he was happy; it was a win-win arrangement.

But the thing that brought Zizi the greatest joy was when someone gave him some soap. Soap, for some strange glitch in the workings of his simple mind, was his passion and his

creed, and it was all he needed. He talked about soap, sang about soap, asked for soap and kept it in his pocket. He washed his hands and his arms, his face and his neck in every fountain. When the weather was good, he even washed his head and his torso with soap. But the best thing about soap was making bubbles. That was the secret. He crushed the soap people gave him, melted the chunks into water, and, using pieces of straw, or rings of grass, or even his thumb and his index finger, he blew the most incredible bubbles: bright, colourful bucciuccche that rose slow and triumphant into God's blue sky.

Zizi gazed at them, his eyes and his mouth wide open, and as he gazed he shouted "Look, look, look bubbucciucca!" which always earned him some laughter.

So it was that Zizi would show up at the washhouse, welcomed by the motherly voices of the washerwomen, who would call to him and set aside a piece of soap for the boy. The washhouse was Zizi's paradise: all those mothers in one place, those hands soaked in water, those glorious suds and the faithful miners who brought him his gold. It was there that he found pure water to melt the soap and a joyous sun just waiting to celebrate his bubbles.

After the washhouse, he would turn up in the schoolyard and reap the laughter and ribbing of his brighter peers. The teasing bounced off Zizi like the wind on soap-cleaned skin. The teachers would embrace him with pity, and, perhaps, to breath some fresh air after smelling the stench from the necks of normal boys and girls all day. They would toy once again with the idea of signing the papers and sending him off to Scuola Mereu in Cagliari, where a hundred fools just like him were welcomed and educated. But talk never led to noble action. As teachers of the state they had to praise the modern and civil institution, as mothers they knew that Zizi's place was there, with them.

So at midday he would run to the square, amid raspy old men, who were generous with their mottos, and raucous with their grunts and whistles, and moved suddenly to frighten him, but were always ready to defend the boy if anyone, who had had a drop too many, went too far.

Then on to the kitchens, to bring wild asparagus, chicory and other herbs to the women, trading them for bread and hugs, ham, cheese and soap; sometimes, on a really good day, it wasn't kitchen soap, but a piece of glorious sweet-smelling sabonète from the sacred bathroom.

Years passed, and Zizi's mind remained unchanged, trapped by some enchantment, reliable as the new year's sparrows and freshly bloomed lilies, ever the same, year after year; but not so his body, it changed, and grew, and became manly, and by some mysterious misfortune he became strong and handsome.

A different spice bloomed in the eyes of the younger women and in the jokes of the older ones, in the silent musings of the men, and in the sayings of the old. "He needs to be locked up, poor boy," they would say, "before the nature growing within him does some damage".

It harmed no one when Zizi, without a care in the world, lifted the skirts of two girls in front of everybody in the school courtyard. His eyes grew wide and happy, and he sang his song of amazement: "Look, look, look bubbucciucca!"

With those words the alarm vanished from the schoolteacher's faces and they laughed;

they scolded him and gave the girls some candy and that was that.

It harmed no one when it was older girls, no longer of the schooling age, who revealed the hidden beauty of Zizi Sabonète in the shadows of a kitchen; trusting stupidity would keep him quiet, but prepared, if he spoke, to call him a liar and a maniac.

Well Zizi looked, and let them look.

But a dark omen hovered over the town, month after month it grew, heavy as whispered words. The priest offered words of warning from the pulpit, the women traded comments beside the stream, and drunk men made drunken threats outside the bar. A silent evil was growing and the town was in the throes of a vague abdominal pain. They tossed and turned in agony, uncertain of how it would all end.

One day it happened.

A girl was found in the fields, not far from the last houses, in tears. Her clothes were torn and her words confused. All she could say was someone attacked her, "did things". Tears and hiccups hid the culprit. "He had a mask like an ugly devil" was all; nothing more could be gotten from her.

The town was divided. Half pointed at Zizi Sabonète, saying he had the body of a boy that drove him to do things his childish mind couldn't understand; the other half defended him, saying he was completely innocent, that he wasn't the type to wear a mask; he was foolish but not malicious. But even his defenders, when pressed to name a suspect, lowered their heads and were silent.

Furthermore, the damage was not so severe. The police didn't even ask the family if they wished to report the event, knowing it was a matter to be resolved by the town's own parliaments, at the fountain, in the bar and in the sacristy, without a trace of pen on paper. The girl was sent to her aunt's for a holiday. She would stay in Milan for a while, and, who knows, maybe after a few years she would find work there, and, who knows: good might yet come of the matter.

A teacher, who seemed to understand Zizi Sabonète well, pressed him for a long time, and the priest, who had never liked him much and now had proof that he was right, pressed him even longer. But the young idiot never seemed to have any idea of what they were talking about, nor did he ever answer their questions.

He was locked up.

The priest insisted on preventing further harm, and offered to keep the boy in the wood shack near the church until he could clear things up with the bishop. His assistant would provide food for the boy, and the parish would cover the expenses, a fact he underscored more than once.

When the old witch realized it was getting dark and he hadn't come home, she began to ask around. She was informed that he had been locked up, understood the reason why, and after having complained briefly about bad luck - it wasn't clear whether she intended her own or the boy's - she retired to her dark abode.

The town had changed. Silence seemed to have fallen over everyone now that the laughing, and the shouting, and the senseless babbling of the boy was gone. Only necessary words were exchanged, greetings, questions, answers, information. And without those wobbly spheres drifting up to the sky from everywhere, from the fountains, in the square,

sorting the sun's rays into the seven colours, the light of day seemed suddenly void and sterile.

Other, less joyous, bubbles began to float around town. Dark spheres laden with remorse and smelling of fear. Both sides were equally remorseful: whether for having accused an innocent soul or for not having defended him and pointed out the perpetrator. People began to fear that locking the boy up was worse than the original crime: so long as Zizi Sabonète was locked up, the wound remained open, and the town held its breath as it waited for more bitter tidings.

Three days later the suspense ended: the boy ran away.

He forced the door to the shack, demonstrating more strength and skill than anyone expected, and disappeared, never to return. We can only wonder what thoughts wandered into that dull mind when the boy lost his freedom, his friends, his sunshine and his bubbles all in a single day. The fact of the matter was, Zizi Sabonète vanished and no one knew where to.

No one, that is, except for an old washerwoman, who finally understood.

It happened at dawn, a month after his disappearance. The woman was washing her clothes and singing her songs, when she suddenly fell silent and stared at the river. Not only were there bubbles downstream of her washing, a foam was moving toward her from upstream. She lifted her eyes to the bend in the river, and winced. Five decades she had soaked her hands in those waters, and never had she seen anything of the sort. The river was shining and bubbling with radiant bubbles, large and small, minute and immense, hundreds popped and thousands more emerged and ran down the river and through the rocks. Every now and then one rose from a splash and flew up to the sky.

She gathered her things in a hurry and ran into town. There she learned, from a shocked group of women, that soapy water had been flowing through the faucets and out of the fountains since morning.

The washerwoman suddenly understood what had happened and told everyone.

Zizi Sabonète had drowned.

He had wandered through the fields for a day, maybe two. Then he had fallen, or thrown himself, into some natural well connected to the aquifers. And there, in dark waters, he melted away.

His fingers thinned; his hands, his arms and legs turned to gelatine; his chest became soft as a beehive, and his skin melted away like honey. His flesh was like soap, and the water washed it away.

Zizi Sabonète rolled silently in the dark refuge, immersed and melted into primordial soup, dreaming of infinite time, but backwards, like a child in the womb, unravelling rather than forming, layer by layer.

This went on for days and days, for he was a large boy; he gave his body generously to the water, forgetting all things, he thinned and he faded, less and less, then nothing. Water to water, frothy and sweet smelling it rose through the aquifers and into the wells, and up through the faucets throughout the town.

The prodigious soapy water only flowed for a day, but a special smell lingered for another ten days, clean and gentle. The townspeople recognized it: in their pasta and coffee, in their clothes and on their faces as they bathed in those waters, on their floors, and in their fields and in every street.

A few days later a dark young lad left suddenly. He was the son of a powerful Don, who

put everyone to their knees with either gunpowder or ink. Word went round that he'd been sent to a seminary to become a priest and throw a black garment over the hot coals within.

The townspeople breathed a sigh of relief. Peace had returned. Hearts opened once more with immense gratitude. Deep as an aquifer hidden inside a mountain, clean as soap could wash it.

Zizi died a happy death, and washed the town clean.

"So, these hands wash your clothes, my dear townspeople, and this mouth washes what ails you. Yesterday's sorrows are washed and become stories, and help us address our present troubles. What we couldn't say then, we will say now. What water won't wash will be cleansed with air from our mouths. So, this is where I'll stay, Francesco, innocent lamb, and so long as water flows through this river and air through these lungs, your bubbles will glisten in the sun. Look, look!"

2 A tale about doorbells

"One day I heard the mothers at the washhouse complaining and worrying about a group of rebellious children and wondering what it would take to correct them. Each night, this band of rambunctious lads ran about ringing their neighbour's doorbells, running their hands down the whole row and then running away. The neighbours knew full well who the children were, and whose children they were, and it wouldn't be long before one of them, Zuanne Aresti, a cantankerous old man whose only friend was the bottle, would do something rash.

I listened and smiled to myself.

Most washerwomen love to tell stories while they wash, but few of them know how to wash a story. It takes skill and a firm wrist to pick a soaking wet story up out of the water, where others have dropped it, and wring it dry and soak it again and beat it and wash it. I stood there and listened to the tale of the doorbells and smiled. I knew that soon, in a different setting, in the parish or in a courtyard at night, or while waiting for the hairdresser, the story would be told differently. Pressed here, and beaten there, and dyed a nice shade of black, it would go something like this:"

Zuanne Aresti had had enough. If the mothers were unable to straighten out their children, then he would do the job for them, and set them straight with bumps and bruises and beatings all over.

He would wait by the door, a stick in his hand, and wait and wait, until midnight if need be, with a bottle and a cup and some patience.

Zuanne Aresti waited and waited...

As the hours passed the bottle emptied, and as the bottle emptied his head filled with glorious thoughts. He thought of war and revenge. This was a night for payback. He breathed, and he drank, and he looked at his stick.

However, as fate would have it, the drink he had that night was his ten thousandth drink that year, and he'd drunk no less the years before. His liver was a shambles, all soaked in wine. So, when the doorbell rang that evening, it wasn't the children: it was Death.

Zuanne Aresti, unaware of who it was, lifted his head and smiled a vicious smile. He grabbed his stick with one hand and opened the door quickly with the other.

Death took the surprise rather sorely.

He hadn't been on the receiving end of a heavy stick since his days in the puppet theatre with Sandrone and Fagiolino. He did his best to cover himself with his arms, or rather his bones, but one or two blows fell on that ancient skull and made quite a sound.

Zuane Aresti couldn't care less who the tall black fellow was, and he bludgeoned him fiercely.

He had waited years for this moment. It wasn't just the children, life itself had mocked him for decades, always ringing the doorbell as it passed him by, and never once was anyone there when he opened the door.

This time he'd found someone, and the poor soul would pay for them all.

Death finally realized he'd come on the wrong day, turned his heels and ran. Barking dogs came after him as he ran swiftly down the steep hill, and he dropped wrist bones and toe bones and fingers as he escaped.

Having drawn straws to see who would ring Zuane's doorbell, the children made their way up the hill just as Death was running down. They recognized him at once and looked up to see Zuane Aresti waving his stick furiously and laughing. Never again did they ring another doorbell.

No one else died in town that year, and Great Aunt Angela made it to a hundred and six. The year that followed Zuane Aresti died of cirrhosis in a hospital far away, where Death was well known and quickly let in. He died furious and happy, waving his arm in the air with an imaginary stick in his hand.

Another year followed, and a new group of mischievous young children learned to ring doorbells and run away laughing.

"Hear me out mothers. There's a point to the story. Don't stop those poor children from doing their noble deed. It will be a sad day when naught but good and evil visit your home: and never mischief, that wondrous creation, which washes people's homes and people's lives as my stories do. And perhaps even better".

3 A tale about hunting

"One bright morning in June, a morning for white butterflies and chatty women, I laughed with my companions as I washed clean clothes.

I was doing the laundry for a family of tourists, educated folk, doctors and teachers, who had come into town with two large trunks: one full of books for them to read in the shade the whole day, and another full of clothes for me to wash, even though they were clean. See, the books they were reading said their clothes were dirty, even when you couldn't see it. That's what the husband told me, and he was a doctor.

Now I've been washing clothes for thirty years, but I've been listening to and telling stories for a thousand and thirty, so I listened to this tale as well, and believed it. But, what could I do, where was I to brush and where was I to beat, if my eyes couldn't see what was dirty? The doctor told me: the soap will find it. Incredible! I looked at my soap with respect. So here I am amid the butterflies and laughter, happily washing away on this bright sunny day. The pay is good, the work is easy, and as an added bonus I get to wash blindly, my hands don't know where to scrub or why. Who cares, soap will do the job.

Which reminds me of a story about a young man with a job much like mine. He rids computers of invisible things, viruses they call them, like the things that cause diseases, and that's no coincidence, since these computer viruses do damage as well.

Oh, when was it? When did it all happen? And what year is it, since I'm telling the story? Time and stories get all muddled up sometimes. Maybe it's washing things that aren't dirty that makes things confusing. Well, I'll try and stick to what I know, what's never confusing: that unmistakable voice saying, "There was once..." There's always been, and there will always be.

I'm not sure which once this was, but I always know how to start the story.

It goes like this:"

Matteo Canu was a nice young man, the pride of his family and envy of his neighbours, a vision for girls of the marrying type, the example everyone mentioned when talking about how the best and brightest were all leaving. He worked as a programmer and managed security systems for big banks and businesses in faraway places like Milan and Turin. He'd recently returned to town for his father's funeral. Matteo's father was a wealthy man, proud and distant, and Matteo had loved him as much as a proud son can, and should.

Amodio

GALLUCCI

Bar Moka

‘The South really is beautiful,’ I thought looking through the bus window. The sunrise moved over the sky from the horizon, lighting the road that was leading me home.

Quite a sight eh? It’s a shame that it ends eventually.’ The driver of the Roma-Crotone bus said, seeing the look on my face.

I nodded, half smiling. I thought he would just be a typical negative Crotone who thinks that everything beautiful has something to hide. I closed my eyes again.

‘Well, Crotone is just the same as it’s always been. Seasons don’t really exist here, it’s still hot now! Did you bring your swimming costume by the way?’ He said making every effort to keep me awake. ‘The younger people are still going swimming.’

I listened as best I could, nodding in and out of sleep. I listened for a few seconds and then lulled back into a slumber.

‘I mean they’re all a bit crazy if you ask me,’ he suddenly said, changing his tone. ‘It’s chaos there, people don’t even respect mother nature anymore. Do you know what my missus says.’ He asked me but I was already asleep. ‘Ohhhh! You listening? What did you say your name was?’ he shouted back to me, getting my full attention.

I replied nearly jumping out of my skin at the sound of his voice, ‘Armando.’

‘Do you know what my missus says?’ He repeated in his strong southern dialect.

I gave in and sat up, giving him my full attention as he watched me.

‘I’m sorry, what did you say?’ I asked in a confused and sleepy voice.

‘My missus. My wife. She says that we just don’t have seasons anymore!’ He said still looking at me.

‘Oh right,’ I answered, butchering the dialect horribly.

‘Don’t worry Armandino, you’ll fall straight back into the Crotone dialect once you’re back there. How long’s it been since you left?’

‘Four years.’

‘Well I’m Michele, but everyone calls me Mico.’

I nodded once more and looked out at the long road. Mico, who had spoken the whole journey, went quiet and then after a long pause continued to burble on.

‘Four year ey. Four years. Four! Blimey!’ He kept repeating it as though he were reciting a mantra of some kind. He was set on keeping my attention.

‘Yep. Four years.’ I got up out of my seat. I had been on the road for seven hours and apart from a couple of hours of sleep, I had been awake the whole time and Mico had made the most of it. With his eyes constantly watching me it seemed as though he was almost saying that if he wasn’t going to sleep then I wasn’t either.

‘Wake up Armando! We’re nearly there!’ He said watching me take my sunglasses off. ‘So how come you didn’t come back to see us in four years?’

‘I didn’t want to.’ I replied, not really knowing what to say.

‘And your parents? Are they in England too?’

I shook my head slowly, hoping that Mico would just drop the subject.

‘Why have you come back then? You did four years away from here surely you could have stayed away longer! Here nothing changes, it just gets worse.’ He said, laughing.

‘How long until we arrive?’

‘We’re nearly at “brigante bridge” so probably about twenty minutes. Are you going to stay there long?’

‘Just a few days.’ I replied, still looking out of the window. The sun was moving higher into the sky. We were at the peak of Rocca di Neto and as we got closer to Crotone, anxiety began to build in me and I felt the need for a cigarette.

‘Why is the bus so empty?’ I asked Mico.

‘Well who would bother coming to Crotone in October? People barely come anymore in the summer.’

It was a sad thought. A sad thought that was interrupted by Mico shouting and pointing at the bridge. The bridge where a bandit had managed to escape from the police by jumping off the bridge. Somehow he survived and got away. Once you were over the bridge you were in Crotone. The landscape, all flat with bits of beach, and then the blue sea, the same blue as the sky all came flooding into view. The journey, thank God, was nearly over.

‘Welcome to Crotone! Pythagoras’ city!’ Mico announced in a loud voice. ‘Ha! Pythagoras’ city my backside. This is the city of shit. Look at it, ergh.’ He pointed at a pile of rusty iron known as the abandoned Pertusola. I stood up and stretched looking out at the view. I couldn’t believe I was back there after four years.

‘Do you want to be left anywhere in particular? Since we’re ten minutes early and you’re the only passenger, I can take you where you want to go.’

I got off the bus in piazza Pitagora that I knew would be empty at that time.

A truck was unloading packages outside Mariuzzo’s newsstand, a road sweep was cleaning the streets with his headphones in and bar Moka was half open and the fresh smell of pastries was falling out onto the street.

‘Aren’t you going to call anyone?’ Mico asked, seeing me alone.

‘No,’ I said with a half smile realizing I didn’t need to answer anymore questions and could finally light a cigarette.

‘Thanks for the company Armandi.’ Saying goodbye with a wave.

‘Thank you Mico, goodbye.’

It was very hot, considering it was seven in the morning and it was the first day of Octo-

ber. I had left London grey and cold and found myself in Crotone where it was at least fifteen degrees hotter and felt like summer. I looked around piazza Pitagora and thought about what had Mico had said about everything staying the same. He was right. I had heard those words thousands of times since I was a child. Everything had remained the same. The same stores, same colours, same silence.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the sound of a shutter rising. As I approached the smell of freshly baked croissant in bar Moka, I could hear a woman's voice, powerful and coarse – unmistakable.

'Ana' I thought with a smile beaming across my face. It was her voice and I'd have known it anywhere. I put my bag on the floor and finished my cigarette. Four years is a long time, I thought. Would she recognise me? Would she have a just hugged me or would she have had a go at me for being gone for so long? I could have written to her of course in four years. For goodness sake. My legs began to shake. I felt nervous, so I threw the cigarette on the floor and headed for the bar. The minute I stepped inside and saw Ana standing there, I began to cry, without even realizing what was happening.

'Goodmorning. Can I help?' Suddenly there was a smash, the sound of a cup falling and landing on the floor, letting me know that Ana hadn't forgotten me.

'Oh my god! I can't believe it! Four years! Four years and you look so well! You're beautiful Armandino, my beautiful man!' She hugged me tightly and kissed my cheeks. 'Oh god, look what I've done!' She dropped to the floor, picking up all the pieces of the broken cup.

'Let me help you' I said through my tears.

'Don't you dare! Go and drop that bag down and make yourself comfortable!' She ordered. 'I knew you'd come back Armandino, don't ask me how but I just knew. We witches know these things.'

Ana was eccentric with huge eyes and constantly dishevelled hair. She was 5ft 2 and when she wasn't working in the bar, she would often spend her time wondering around Crotone. Everyone in the town had given her a nickname, 'the strange one.' She was known as that because of her huge hair and colourful skirts and love of lace. She was born in Romania but ended up in Crotone after following her true love Filippo. She started working in the bar and people quickly realised she had a gift for making pastries. They were known as the best in Crotone and her coffee too, that according to the locals, tasted like the coffee in Naples and only Ana knew how to make it like that.

One day she decided to leave. According to the owner of the bar Luciano, Ana had gone to India to find herself and would be back in two months. However two months turned to three, which turned to four and then eight, but she would always send postcards from different places she had visited. Mumbai, Bangalore and Madere. She would explain that she was fine and she didn't miss Crotone at all. However one day, she returned and went into bar Moka to greet all the customers with her hands together saying, 'Namasté.'

'Nama..what?' Luciano had asked.

'It's the Indian greeting. It means hello.' Ana explained not realising everyone was laughing after her.

Everyone had nodded and then looked at each other as if to say, 'she's mad.'

'Oh Ana I've missed you so much.'

'And I've missed you Armandino! You look so well. Are you still doing yoga?' She asked

Armando, placing the broken pieces of the cup in the bin.

'Of course, are you still teaching it?' I replied.

'Yes! Every Monday and Thursday as always. But you've changed so much! Here, we're all just getting older and uglier. I always said the sun is bad for the skin and ages people. What can I get you? A coffee? A croissant with jam as always?'

'Yes please. Is Vincenzina here?'

'She missed you so much. Let her know you're coming before you visit her! You'll give her a heart attack. Does anyone know you're here?'

'No no. No one can know.' I replied

Ana nodded. 'We never forgot about you. Especially Vincenzina, she always talks about you.'

She made my coffee and then went over to where she kept all the pastries looking for the biggest and nicest one for me. She came over with a giant croissant and a coffee. Before I'd even had a chance to take a sip she asked me what it was like.

'It's the best. As if I haven't had coffee for four years. It's so good to hear your voice.' I said looking at her.

'Why are you back Armandino? I'm so pleased to see you but it's made me slightly nervous.'

'I heard about Don Carlo.'

'Ergh bastard. He met the end he deserved.'

'Is Vincenzina still doing yoga?' I asked.

'For a day she does it and then come again for months. She hasn't changed.'

'Does she still live in the Smart?'

'Of course. It's her kingdom. Where are you staying?'

'I booked a room in the Sole Hotel.'

'Oh dear, it's worse than ever.' She said chuckling.

'That's where I'll be,' I smiled back.

Ana nodded, 'you really haven't changed.'

Hai Si Ja Hold Tight!

First meeting with Vincenzo

It is difficult to be different and grow up in a place like Crotone. Vincenzo knew he was different from a very young age, but it was when he turned eight that it really became clear.

He was in year four when he first tried to kiss his classmate, the boy he shared his desk with, because he had fallen in love with him. After refusing him many times, Francesco, the boy, burst into tears saying he didn't want to sit next to Vincenzo anymore because he was 'a faggot.'

From then on, the name stuck and even the other children in the school began to refer to Vincenzo in that disgraceful way. The teacher met with his parents and the decision was made to move him to a different school 'for his own good.'

The move changed Vincenzo, but not his natural instincts. He was still different and didn't like football or the other children at school, who only spoke about football. Even Francesco used to do it but he could get away with it. Instead of football, he liked dance and instead of the boys for company, he preferred to be with the girls. With them he

could speak about anything and they shared all their passions, especially The Spice Girls. They didn't judge him and it made him feel less different.

When he was ten years old, he discovered that his nature could be definite as something other than 'faggot'. He heard on the television someone speaking about homosexuals, and along with the word came some images of nude men, he realised that that he had something in common to these people.

'What does homosexual mean?' He asked his parents one lunchtime.

His father, on hearing the word, went pale and got up from the table. Standing at the sink he asked his son if someone had called him that to which Vincenzo replied no but that he simply wanted to know what it was.

'It means nothing. Homosexuals are bad people. Drug addicts and perverts. Now eat and never say that word again.' His mother said sharply.

Around the same time, not far from Vincenzo, I was facing a battle of my own. Dance school. It had not been easy to convince my parents but I had been firm and after trying many other more 'masculine' sports, I eventually won and was allowed to go to the Olympia dance school.

It was my father I really had to convince. He had dreamed of having a footballer as a son since I was his only boy. It was difficult for him to accept that not only was his dream not going to come true but his son was going to be partaking in a particularly feminine hobby. My mother came with me to register at the school and get my membership card.

Name: Armando Fiorillo

Age: 10

Type of dance: Modern

Membership type: Monthly

'What does it mean by monthly.'

'Just leave it, who knows, you might change your mind.' My mother replied.

'I won't.' I replied, excited to enter this new world of girls in tutus and music and other exciting aspects of dance.

'Here you go! Two other boys have also signed up today,' said the secretary as she handed over my card.

'Only two?' Asked my mother.

'Yes but just think, last year there was only one boy! Now there is no boys changing room so you can go and change in the storage cupboard and can shower in the teacher's bathroom. Now Mrs Fiorillo, it's time to leave, we'll see you in an hour.'

My mother waved at me sadly and left.

'Oh these parents. How many other sports did they make you try before they brought you here?' The secretary asked.

'How do you know they did?' I said confused.

'It's the same every year for all the boys who come to the dance school. Today is a special day for you. Are you ready? You're going to be a wonderful dancer. I can see it in your eyes.' She said as she directed me to the storage cupboard. She explained that I'd have to share it with another boy who had already arrived. She knocked on the door and a voice replied.

'He's already in there. Well Armando! Welcome to Olympia.' And then she was gone.

I went into the storage cupboard and felt the need to cry. I panicked at the thought of having to dance in front of other children who might mock me. I thought about my friends from school. They must never find out!

'Hi,' said the other boy coming over to me.

'Hi,' I replied.

'Is it your first lesson?' He asked.

'Yes.'

'Modern or classic?'

'Modern, you too?' I replied.

'Of course. Who are you in the Spice Girls?' He asked me.

'I don't understand.' I said fully understanding what he meant and feeling mortified at the question.

'Out of the Spice Girls, which one do you want to be? I'm Geri, Ginger Spice! You?' I thought about what my father would have said and done had he been there.

'I don't know.' I replied looking down.

'Hmm well you don't say much so you must be Posh Spice!' He exclaimed contently.

I looked up at Ginger Spice. He had huge eyes and his facial features were very delicate. Everything about him was feminine even his voice.

'Are you a girl or a boy?'

'I'm Vincenzo and you are?' He said putting his hand out for a handshake.

'Armando.'

'Ok Armando! I'll meet you in the hall.'

'Wait I want to ask you something.' I said suddenly. 'Are there lots of girls in there?'

'Yes, loads, but only three of them are good. The others are rubbish.'

'Will they make fun of me?' I asked shyly.

'Of course. Come on Posh Spice!'

'Wait I need to tell you something.'

'Go on.' He said looking confused.

'I don't like Posh Spice.'

'Me neither, she's so grumpy and she can't dance! Which one do you like?'

'Mel B.'

Vincenzo burst out laughing, 'I knew you were Scary Spice! Come on! We're late and they're waiting for us.'

'I'll be right there.' I said.

'And remember, Hai Si Ja Hold Tight!' He sang, mimicking the Spice Girls.

A few afternoons later, in the same storage cupboard, that became our secret meeting place to talk about the Spice Girls, he asked me, 'do you know what a homosexual is?'

'Its when a man like other men instead of women.' I replied quietly just in case anyone else heard.

'So it's like a faggot!'

'SHH!! But yes more or less.' I replied.

'My mum said that Renato Zero is a homosexual.' He said.

'Really?'

'Yeah that's why he moves so strangely.'

'What do you mean?'

'He likes dancing.'

'Like us?'

'Yes exactly. Do you know what they call a man who wants to be a girl? But properly not just in your head?' He asked.

'No, I don't know.'

'Me neither! If you find out let me know.'

I don't think Vincenzo every really felt like a boy. When he was twelve and alone in the house, he started putting on women's clothes and when he would look in the mirror, he felt good and comfortable. These dress-up sessions at first occurred rarely, maybe twice or three times a month when his father was at work and his mother was away from the house for a few hours. He would raid her wardrobe and find the most beautiful skirts. He would try them on and then prance down the corridor to the living room where there was a huge mirror and he could admire himself as a woman.

Sometimes he felt embarrassed, but sometimes he liked it.

Then he began on make up. He would take an eyeliner and run it round his eye and then take the lipstick and use it generously. Slowly as the months went by, the embarrassment faded and the dress-up sessions would occur more regularly. Hours would pass with him in front of the mirror and he was happy. He imagined himself with long, blonde hair and he would shave regularly because he couldn't bare the sight of the hairs growing on his face. One day he tried on one of his mother's bras and felt sad because he had no breasts to fill it with.

With this personality came the trouble. He was victim to another attack at school that forced him to move again. It all happened because of a cigarette. He asked two of the boys who were normally seen smoking if he could try one. They said no but Vincenzo, who everyone called Vin, persisted asking for a puff of theirs. They replied that they would give nothing to a faggot, not even half a puff and began to call him names and chase him. Vincenzo tried to run but it was too late.

'Is it true that you're a faggot?' One asked mockingly.

'Of course it is look at him!' Said the second.

'He's a bloody faggot.'

'Don't you know what happens to faggots?'

'Please leave me alone!' Vincenzo said before one of them punched him in the stomach making him fall to the ground.

'Faggots deserve to die.'

Vin tried to run again but they stopped him by kicking him. They threatened him if he shouted for help. The boy was the son of Costa, the most well-known Mafioso in the area and it was said that they really did burn gays. Vin shouted with all his might for help but was kicked again in the face. The janitor heard the scream and ran to the toilet where he found Vin passed out on the floor with his nose broken with the other boys standing over him.

'He tried to touch us!' Said Costa's son.

'He came in and touched us between our legs!' The other said.

The janitor rang the emergency alarm and the word spread of what had happened. The two boys were suspended while Vin was taken to hospital. When he came around, he explained what had really happened to his parents and teachers who were left lost for

words.

This was not the first time he had experienced an attack of that kind. And on top of the physical violence came the psychological abuse, which was even more cruel. He would be constantly called names as he walked down the corridor. The school became a nightmare and the horrible word appeared in huge red letters on the wall of the boy's toilets where Vincenzo had been attacked a few hours before.

A catechism for learned fools

GALLUCCI

Introduction

It's fair to ask why this altogether unique catechism for "learned fools" is introduced by an "unbeliever", especially given that it is an orthodox Catholic catechism. The reason, I would say, is that this is an orthodox text, written by a priest, who is both a parson and a canon, but who refuses to be defined by those titles. When Pierre Riches very cautiously told me that he was thinking of writing a catechism for "educated fools", adding, with a hint of embarrassment, that it would be an "orthodox" text, I found the thought hilarious. I thought to myself – though I didn't tell him at the time – that an orthodox text was exactly what I expected of him; in fact, I demanded it. Providing a vibrant vision of what I considered the boneyard of orthodoxy seemed far greater an adventure than experimenting with the unorthodox. The task he set before himself would require subtlety and a calculated mix of wisdom and folly.

I believe Pierre Riches has achieved his goal: he has provided a miniaturized universe and yet succeeded in keeping everything in its proper place; his is a minutely scaled down universe, and it is deceptively easy to handle. The result is a catechism that is both coherent and easy to read. The work is flavoured with a touch of deliberate folly. The tone is gentle and, at times, surprisingly disturbing. There is, it seems, an approach to orthodoxy that has lessons we can all learn, regardless of where we're at.

Few succeed in the task, but I have, in the past, enjoyed the work of some necessarily orthodox writers: from the boundless and, entirely, "faithful" Chesterton to cardinal Newman, whose *Apologia pro vita sua* is a great work of prose, a touching and uncomfortably insightful book. On the other hand, I found Belloc's partisan orthodoxy and Bargellini's very "Italian" approach tedious.

There's more: I'm not interested in concepts; a statement like "there is a God" means nothing to me, it has all the movement of a legal statement; on the other hand, the proposition "there is no God", which is both an affirmation and a negative, touches me deeply. Beyond the meaning of the phrase itself, I sense that it is a linguistic gesture: atheism is firmly at the centre and theism must win it over. I cannot live out, interpret or read

into a concept. I can, on the other hand, do much with a gesture. And a series of gestures can become a ceremonial dance.

This text is densely packed with concepts, but my interest lies in the gestures; the way the subject is approached, embraced, expanded upon. Such movements transcend the gesture just as mythological awareness transcends the ritual dance. I believe there is a level of experience that belongs to the world of the mind, of fantasy, but is also tangible and accessible to all, no matter where we're coming from.

Hell may be experienced this way. An infernal plague haunts the mind of man. We are all commuters from the underworld, and when this gentle, cautious priest suggests that it is not altogether unthinkable that hell is empty, he stirs up a trauma that is both psychological and mythological; the idea of an exile paired with the thought that there is a centre. We may take things further with a more literal or allegorical interpretation; the theology of Good Friday and Easter Sunday reminds us that we have all been offered a dark Friday, for which there is no repair, and that we are, at the same time, eternally "haunted" by the catastrophic myth of the resurrection. Two meanings dwell within us, giving us life and making life unbearable.

Saint Augustine's description of the Trinity is a splendid "tale of light", an archaic epiphany of the centre of the world.

Finally, we may go beyond what Pierre Riches intended, and see a further interpretation. God, whose means of existence is beyond us, may not exist intellectually, but exist emotionally; hence we are aware of darkness, despite the darkness and because of the darkness, as we walk the path of love, which is the central theme of one of the great books produced in medieval England, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The book is mentioned in the text and Pierre Riches once compared it to another text that is extremely dear to us both, the Chinese *Tao-të-ching*.

After all, one may read this book by looking beyond the concepts, and beyond the world of gestures, by applying the Tao – "the Way that has a name is not the Way". The *Tao-të-ching* is one of the rare bottomless texts produced by humanity. It reaches for what cannot be grasped. It speaks of silence and centres on what is unattainable, uninhabitable, a detached and loving elsewhere.

Pierre Riches seems to be a missionary from the third, or even fourth world, who is reaching out to our land. A land of whites who own everything except themselves, and who profess "real" orthodoxy. Pierre is both clear and elusive; his mental starting point, both near and far, is a place where "unreal" orthodoxy is professed, and the Christian recognizes the face of it, and its gestures, in the Way that has no name.

Giorgio Manganelli

Premise

This work is meant to be an extremely simple, generalized exposition of the reasoning (rational, intuitive and experiential) that led me to accept Catholicism as the answer to the question: “Does life have meaning?” (a question I started asking when I was 12).

The book is divided into little chapters, and these are not always connected to each other. Each chapter may one day (who knows if or when?) be expanded upon.

For now, all I’m aiming to do is offer food for thought. Each chapter is meant to help the reader collect his thoughts, supposing he has wrestled with those same questions, and develop his “worldview”.

This is my worldview, both what is clear to me and what is not; each person may stop at any point, and, perhaps, take a different path.

As I will state in chapter 35, truth is out there, but the discovery must be personal. No one can impose it upon another and no one can say: “This is the truth”. All one can say is: “There is one truth, and one alone. My thinking and my experience tell me that the truth is best described by these propositions, as opposed to others, and should be lived out this way, rather than this other way”.

The evening before I was baptized (I was 23 years old), my godfather asked me: “Do you really believe?” I answered: “If it isn’t true, it was such a great discovery...” To this day, though I do believe, I cannot say whether it is true, but I have discovered nothing greater, not even the Buddha.

Part one

Questions and their answers

1 The question

Few answers may be provided to the question: “Does the world, does life have meaning?”

There are only three options: “yes”, “no” or “perhaps, but we will never know”¹.

The way a person behaves will depend largely on the answer given to this question.

Let’s take a look at the paths that each of these answers lead to: When the answer is “No”, life is meaningless and one can either despair and/or choose to eat, drink and be merry “for tomorrow I will die”.

One may even avoid the question and plod through life, filling every moment, but it’s a bitter journey, for one cannot think and one cannot hope.

There are countless variations to the theme. Perhaps the most sophisticated of which is to be fully egocentric, as libertines are; desperation and suicide seems the only logical way of escape.

If I may paraphrase a poem by Yeats, 1919: “Man is in love, and loves what is fading. What more can be said?”

2 The agnostic option

If the answer is: “Perhaps, but we will never know”, there are once more countless paths. A man may dwell in agnosticism and simply live his life as best he can. There may be moments of great happiness, but, I believe, that deep, lasting peace would be hard to find.

Continuing along this path, desiring to learn how to live, one will reach the same conclusion as the “first” Buddha.

The Buddha, after having been guarded from age, sickness and death throughout his

youth, happened upon these three plagues one day. He reacted so strongly that he decided to abandon all and find a way to escape the horror of those plagues.

After having spent years exploring the philosophies present in India, and after years of penitence and rigorous asceticism he was enlightened, and learned that the source of all these ills is desire and attachment.

There are no answers to the fundamental questions of philosophy. What's more, should answers be found, they would be of no use. An ancient Buddhist text illustrates this position well:

Always remember, says the Buddha, what I have made clear, and what I have not made clear. What have I not made clear? I have not made it clear that the world is eternal, and I have not made it clear that the world is not eternal; I have not made it clear that the world is finite, and I have not made it clear that the world is infinite; I have not made it clear that the body and the soul are one and the same; I have not made it clear that the monk who has achieved enlightenment exists after death; I have not made it clear that the monk does not exist after death; I have not made it clear that the monk exists and doesn't exist after death... why have I not made these things clear?

Because it is of no advantage, nor does it affect the foundations of religion, that is why I have not made these things clear. And what has the Buddha learned? What is "useful"? The remainder of the text tells us:

What have I made clear? I have explained pain; I have explained the origins of pain; I have explained the ceasing of pain, and I have shown the way that leads to the ceasing of pain. Why have I made this plain? Because this is useful, is relevant for the foundation of religion, it limits passion, leads to knowledge, to supreme wisdom and to Nirvana². Let us not ask, says the Buddha, what is true, what is not true; whether there is meaning, whether there is not, let us detach ourselves, and remove all attachment and desire.

3 More on the Buddha

The Buddha shows us a way of life, a path, not knowledge. Two more texts illustrate this. The first is a legend³:

One day a woman in tears went to see the Buddha. Her dear grandchild had died. The Buddha gazed at her severely and asked, apparently without reason, "How many inhabitants are there here in Savatthi?" When he was given an answer, he explained, "Would you like to have children and grandchildren as numerous as this city?" The old woman cried, "Yes, yes!" "Well then, the Buddha replied softly, if you had as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Savatthi, you would cry every day, because people die every day in Savatthi".

The grandmother thought for a while: the Buddha was right.

She was comforted and left, reflecting on the following saying: "Those who have a hundred loved ones suffer a hundred times; those who have ninety loved ones suffer ninety times... those who have one loved one suffer once – those who hold nothing dear suffer no loss".

The second text is a long poem, The Rhinoceros. Here are a few segments:

*Set down your staff before all living things
And use it not to do them harm:
desire not children – and what of friends?
Walk alone like the Rhinoceros.*

*Love from companionship;
And from love suffering;
See the pain that stems from love,
Walk alone like the Rhinoceros.*

*Entwined as bamboo branches
Is tender care for wife and children;
But treetops are free from all entanglement
Walk alone like the Rhinoceros*

*Burdened by piety for those he loves
A man with a shackled heart looks not to the end;
See this danger in friendship,
Walk alone like the Rhinoceros*

.....

*As a lion fears no sound
As the wind cannot be caught
As the lotus is never muddied
Walk alone like the Rhinoceros*

.....

People follow and serve you to their own end;
Friends who demand nothing are now rare;
Impure are the minds filled with self-serving thoughts,
Walk alone like the rhinoceros.

The Buddha tells us that we cannot know whether or not life has meaning. So let's not worry about knowledge; let's seek to live free from pain and suffering, detaching ourselves from everything.⁴

4 Other Answers

We have discussed how one might face a world that has no meaning, and how to live in a world that may or may not have meaning but is beyond comprehending, and we have offered the Buddha's solution as the most coherent for the latter option.

There is a third answer: the world has meaning. There are infinite subcategories to this answer, these all fit into one of two groups:

- a) Life has meaning in this world, but only in this world (one is an atheist or indifferent to the question of atheism vs. theism, whether God does or does not exist). Such an individual will focus on social or political answers or pure individualism. One will, for example, tend to Marxism or liberalism, and will attempt to live out those beliefs; another will focus on the present good for himself and/or his family and work to that end.
- b) Life has meaning beyond this world; something transcends human nature and this world. This is the situation in which, I believe, Catholicism offers the most satisfying answer.

I will not focus here on answers that offer meaning exclusively in this world. (I confess that I find them unsatisfactory, mutilated; they do not, on their own, answer the questions I'm asking). While many social and political solutions deserve our full attention, they are not the focus of this text. I will state, however, that such issues must necessarily be addressed by all men, since they deal with real problems that we must all face.

5 Beyond the world – India

If life has meaning beyond this world, if there is something that transcends human nature, then we call what is “beyond” this world and gives this world meaning “God”; we are theists.

Now there are many forms of theism, but they all acknowledge that there is a “force”, a “power” that is beyond us.

There's simple theism, pantheism, polytheism, dualism and monotheism.

There are, and always have been, many simple theists; they are the ones who appeal to a (vague) force, a (vague) architect, with a vague interest in humanity, or no interest whatsoever. Pantheists say that everything is God, everything is a manifestation of God, and, finally, that all things that exist are God, none excluded.

The most complete expression of this approach that I am aware of is the form of Hinduism wonderfully summed up by the refrain “Tat tvam asi” [this is you] in the Chandogya Upanisad (6,12-13):

1. “Go there and bring me a fruit of the nyagrodha!” “Here you are, oh venerable one”. “Open it”. “Here, it is opened, oh venerable one”. “What do you see?” “These small grains, oh venerable one”. “Very well, open one”. “Here, it is opened, oh venerable one”. “What do you see?” “Nothing, oh venerable one” he answered.
2. So his father said to him: “From this subtle essence which you cannot perceive, dear one, from this subtle essence was this great tree born.
3. You can be sure of it, dear one. Whatever this subtle essence is, the entire universe is composed of it, it is the true reality, it is the Atman. This is you, o Svetaketu”. “Continue to teach me, oh venerable one”. “Very well, dear one”, he replied.

1. “Throw this salt into the water, and come to me tomorrow morning”. He did so. The [the father] said to him: “Now take the salt you threw into the water yesterday”. He searched, but could not find it: it was entirely gone.
2. “Now then, sip some of this water, [take it] from this end. How is it?” “It is salty”. “Sip some more, from the middle. How is it?” “It is salty”. “Eat something more [something salty as a further test]. Then come sit beside me”. He did so and said: “It is always [the same]”. [The father] said: “Dear one, you do not see

what is here, and yet it is surely here.

3. Whatever this subtle essence is, the entire universe is made up of it, it is the true reality, it is the Atman. This is you, o Svetateku”. “Continue to teach me, oh venerable one”. “Very well, dear one”, he replied.⁵

Much more could be said about pantheism, as it takes on different meaning in different contexts, but it is not our main concern for the moment.

6. Polytheism and monotheism

Polytheism is believing in many gods; Greek, Roman and Egyptian religions are some of the many examples. The highest expressions of polytheism are similar to pantheism or, at least, transcend the purely material approach more often attributed to polytheism.

Dualism states that there are two gods, one good and the other evil. Dualism developed fully in Iran and later influenced many other religions. There are many interesting things one could say about pantheism, polytheism and dualism; some variations of these positions provide very elevated expressions of religious sentiment.

Let's turn to monotheism: the belief that there is only one God.

Some primitive religions were monotheistic, but the best known monotheistic religions are those that follow the “Book”.

The religions of the Book are Judaism and Christianity, whose book is the Bible, and Islam, whose book is the Quran, which in turn considers the Bible “sacred”.

The vast majority of humanity has belonged to, or currently belongs to, one of these three religions.

Historically the majority of human beings have believed in the transcendent, in God, believing they had recognized God in one of many ways. This remains true today. But what the majority believes doesn't matter. In Galileo's day, the majority believed the earth was immobile.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Technically speaking there are more options – for example: “No; but we chose to believe anyway” – I cover this option in the “Yes” section (see chapter 35) – can we deceive ourselves (?)

“Yes, but we can't know” – I review this in the “perhaps...” section

“No, but we build it into history” – covered in the “no” section

“Yes, but it can't be communicated” – and there would be nothing more to say, and this

“Yes” is Wittgenstein's “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”.

² Majjhima Nikaya 63, in Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translation*, Harvard University Press, 1922.

³ Udana VIII, 8, in James Bisset Pratt, *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, Mac Millan, New York, 1928, p. 30.

⁴ Sutta Nipata (35-38) in Edward Conze (edited by), *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Books, London, 1959. Italian translation: *Scrittura buddiste*, Astrolabio, Roma.

⁵ Carlo della Casa (edited by), *Chandogya Upanisad*, UTET, Turin, 1976, pp. 250-51.